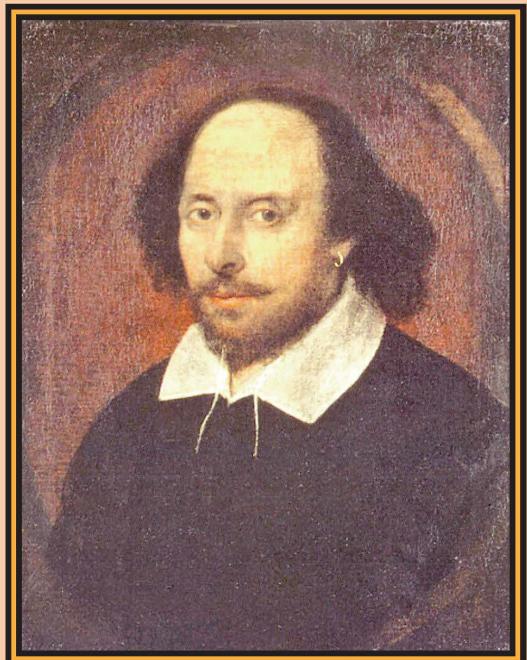
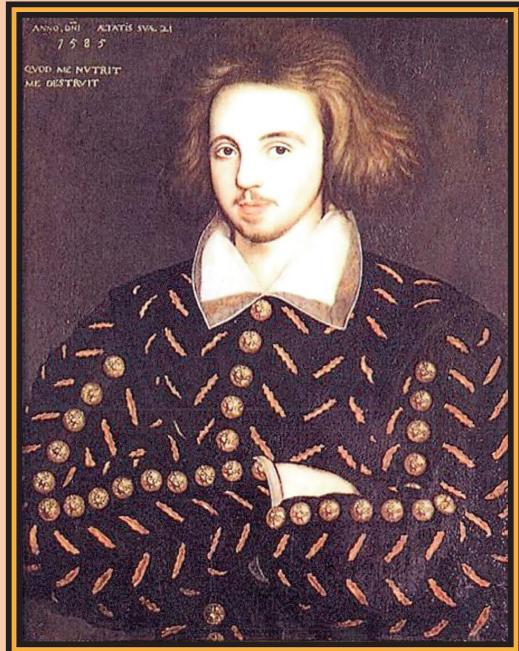


**THE INFLUENCE OF MARSILIO FICINO
(1433-1494)
ON ELIZABETHAN LITERATURE
CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE AND WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

THOMAS O. JONES



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**THE INFLUENCE OF MARSILIO FICINO
(1433-1494)
ON ELIZABETHAN LITERATURE**

Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare

Volume I

Thomas O. Jones

With a Prologue by
Robert Levine

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To Judith and Nina

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	i
Prologue	iii
Introduction.....	v
Volume I	
Chapter One:	
Ancient Egypt Meets Renaissance Florence	3
Chapter Two:	
The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus	17
Chapter Three:	
The Hermetica.....	19
Chapter Four:	
Ficino and Plato's <i>Symposium</i>	91
Chapter Five:	
Ficino and Plato's <i>Phaedrus</i>	117
Chapter Six:	
Ficino's Major Astrology.....	121
Chapter Seven:	
Ficino's Minor Astrology.....	143
Chapter Eight:	
Book of the Sun.....	153
Chapter Nine:	
Ficino—Five Questions on the Mind.....	161

Chapter Ten:	
Ficino's Greatest Work: His Collected Letters	167
Chapter Eleven:	
Aratus, Astrologer From the Ancient World	223
Chapter Twelve:	
Lucretius, Ancient Poet of the Atom	231
Chapter Thirteen:	
Manilius, the Most Devoted of Ancient Astrologers	241
Chapter Fourteen:	
Pythagoras, First Magus of the Ancient World.....	249
Chapter Fifteen:	
Macrobius, the Ultimate Commentator.....	267
Chapter Sixteen:	
Plotinus, the Greatest Platonist Since Plato	279
Chapter Seventeen:	
Proclus, Philosopher of the Endless Sentences	287
Chapter Eighteen:	
Iamblichus, Master of Theurgy	299
Chapter Nineteen:	
The Angelic Hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius.....	305
Chapter Twenty:	
Boethius, the Philosopher of Lasting Values	313

Chapter Twenty-one:	
Julianus, the Unsung Mystic	327
Chapter Twenty-two:	
The Egyptian Hieroglyphics of Horapollo.....	337
Chapter Twenty-three:	
The Meaning of Words in Nicholas of Cusa.....	345
Chapter Twenty-four:	
The Wondrous Achievement of	
Pico della Mirandola	369
Chapter Twenty-five:	
The Many Sides of Cornelius Agrippa	379
Chapter Twenty-six:	
The Pathbreaking Life of Paracelsus	393
Chapter twenty-seven:	
William Adlington, Translator of	
Elizabethan Times.....	417
Chapter Twenty-eight:	
Thomas Norton, Poet Laureate of Alchemy	425
Chapter Twenty-nine:	
Jacob Boehme, the Shoemaker Turned Mystic.....	435
Chapter Thirty:	
John Dee, the Magus of Queen Elizabeth	447
Chapter Thirty-one:	
Giordano Bruno, Two Almost Forgotten Works	459

Chapter Thirty-two:

- The Extraordinary Life of Tomasso Campanella..... 469

Chapter Thirty-three:

- Arthur Dee, Jacobean Magus and
Son of John Dee 485

Chapter Thirty-four:

- Johann Reuchlin, the Far-reaching Influence
of His Kabbalah 493

Chapter Thirty-five:

- Basil Valentinè, Master Alchemist 503

Chapter Thirty-six:

- Jean of Spain, Master Alchemist..... 509

Chapter Thirty-seven:

- Six Alchemical Treatises on the Philosopher's
Stone..... 519

Chapter Thirty eight:

- Robert Fludd, the Magus Who Opposed Kepler..... 531

Volume II

Chapter Thirty-nine:

- Marlowe and Shakespeare's Narrative Poems..... 547

Chapter Forty:

- Marlowe's Minor Plays..... 557

Chapter Forty-one:

- Marlowe's *Tamurlaine*, Parts One and Two 595

Chapter Forty-two:

- Shakespeare's Earliest History—*King John* 623

Chapter Forty-three:

- Shakespeare's Early Gothic Melodramas—*Titus*

- Andronicus* and *Timon of Athens* 643

Chapter Forty-four:

- W. H. Auden Connects Ficino and Shakespeare 657

Chapter Forty-five:

- The Magic of Ancient Egypt—

- Antony and Cleopatra* 667

Chapter Fort-six:

- The Doomed Talkers—*Richard II, Faustus*

- and *Hamlet* 687

Chapter Forty-seven:

- The Villain of Villains—*Richard III* 725

Chapter Forty-eight:	
The World's Greatest Love Story—	
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	741
Chapter Forty-nine:	
Magical Structures in Three Comedies	763
Chapter Fifty:	
The Alchemy in Portia's Venice.....	775
Chapter Fifty-one:	
Eloquent Monsters at Large— <i>Othello</i> and	
<i>Measure for Measure</i>	789
Chapter Fifty-two:	
The Making of a King—the Three Plays of	
the Henriad.....	809
Chapter Fifty-three:	
The Structure of the Cosmos—	
<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	829
Chapter Fifty-four:	
<i>King Lear</i>	845
Chapter Fifty-five:	
Two Roman History Plays— <i>Julius Caesar</i> and	
<i>Coriolanus</i>	873
Chapter Fifty-six:	
Magic in Comedy, Romance, and Tragedy.....	889

Chapter Fifty-seven:	
Three Final Romances	911
Chapter Fifty-eight:	
Ben Jonson's Comic Masterpiece—	
<i>The Alchemist</i>	925
Chapter Fifty-nine:	
Isaac Newton and the Emerald Tablet—Looking Forward	953
Descriptive Bibliography:	
Section One - The Ancient World.....	955
Section Two -Ficino and His Age.....	965
Section Three -Primary Texts of Renaissance Magic.....	968
Section Four - Alchemy	975
Section Five - Kabbalah.....	983
Section Six - Medieval and Renaissance Magic	987
Section Seven - Medieval and Renaissance History of Science	997
Section Eight - Shakespeare and His Age.....	1015
Index.....	1031

Acknowledgments

I was introduced to Shakespeare during my senior year at Forest View High School which was built in 1962 in Arlington Heights, Illinois. The school was built in haste out of cinder block to hold the area's overflow of baby boomers. Mrs. Josephine Burkham was my dedicated teacher in honors senior English. She was near the close of a long and outstanding career. *Macbeth* was our first Shakespeare play. Mrs. Burkham provided extensive vocabulary sheets, historic background on Elizabethan theatre, and photographs of historic performances. When we started reading, we were ready. Mrs. Burkham guided us through several other Shakespeare plays, but I still cherish my first encounter with *Macbeth*. Inevitably the baby boom ended, and Forest View closed in 1986.

I then attended George Washington University from 1964 to 1968, majoring in English Literature. I studied Shakespeare with Professor Philip Highfill, a southern gentleman with abundant charm and knowledge. Professor Highfill did his own studying at the Folger Shakespeare Library. He had a great love for theatre, and never let us forget those Shakespeare texts were plays.

Also at GWU, I was introduced to Christopher Marlowe by Dr. Robert Columbus, a dynamic lecturer who could read poetry out loud with passion and wonderful intensity. He could have performed Faustus or Mephistopheles, either one, either way. Dr. Columbus was a Victorian specialist, who still comes to mind when I read Dickens or George Eliot.

I attended graduate school, twice, but never had a professor worth recalling.

In the current century, I am grateful for the kind help and wise assistance of the people at Edwin Mellen Press: Dr. John Rupnow, Professor Herbert Richardson and Ms. Patricia Schultz.

I am grateful to the excellent work of my typist Helen Thorington, as well as her intelligent and helpful suggestions.

Prologue

Let me start with the disclosure that I have known the author of this book for over thirty years. By way of introduction, I first met Tom in 1979 soon after he moved to New York. In the pre-digital age New York was the place to be for working writers, with its close access to most of the major publishing houses and literary agents. The New York of that time was a Mecca for every book lover, where someone could spend days on end searching the stacks of the used book stores that lined Fourth Avenue as well as those scattered throughout Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side.

At the time I was an undergrad with a major in History and a minor in English, and a passion for books that paled in comparison to the passion that Tom exhibited. We would spend many days prowling through those book stores, with brief respites for food to keep up our energy to continue our ongoing explorations for the hidden knowledge that could only be found in the yellowing pages of books long out of print. Having just completed a course in magic and witchcraft in the Middle Age and pre-modern Europe, I shared with Tom my new found awe for one of the books recommended by my instructor. The book was *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* by the English Historian Frances Yates. First published in 1964, it was out of print at the time and quite difficult to come by. I found my copy on one of my explorations of used book stores for \$1.17.

In her seminal study Yates details how Giordano Bruno's thought and philosophy was part of a tradition that went back to the Ficino, who translated and made vast

commentaries on the ancient Hermetic texts, which in turn influenced the scientific and religious thought of the early Modern era. The discovery of this volume by Yates and in turn the work of Marsilio Ficino back in 1979 has lit a fire in Tom that burns brightly to this day. The outcome of his passion is the current volume in which Tom takes us on a journey starting in Fifteenth century Italy. He traces the influence of the esoteric tradition that Ficino set in motion and how it influenced two of the greatest playwrights of Elizabethan England.

Tom's work on the influence of magic and the occult in major works of English literature began with his book *Renaissance Magic and Hermeticism in the Shakespeare Sonnets: Like Prayers Divine* published in 1995. With the current volume and the two others to follow, the reader has the privilege to share the burning passion of the author's scholarship and vision.

Robert Levine

Writer

Robert Levine is a writer in the New York area. He has written extensively on the deep inner connection between politics and spirituality. His essays have appeared in LifeSherpa.com and he is currently completing a book on that topic.

Introduction

These two volumes are the first or opening section of an extensive study of the influence of Marsilio Ficino on major English poets. Ficino lived in Florence, Italy from 1433 to 1499. He introduced Plato to the Renaissance by his translations of the philosopher's complete works with detailed commentary. Prior to Ficino, the only Platonic dialogue available was the *Timaeus*. Ficino also translated with commentary the significant followers of Plato; these figures came to be known as Neo-Platonists and included Plotinus, Proclus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Pseudo-Dionysius. The primary texts of these oft-neglected figures are discussed with ample quotations. Both Plato and the Neo-Platonists were a major intellectual force throughout the Renaissance and for centuries afterwards, with the solid origin being Ficino in Florence.

Ficino was also a significant cause of the different magical belief systems that permeated the Renaissance and lingered long afterwards. As a young man, in 1464, Ficino translated from Greek to Latin, fifteen treatises that his readers believed contained the basic truths of ancient Egyptian magic, from the time of the pharaohs. All Ficino's translations were made from Greek to Latin, the scholarly language of his century. He was a rare Greek scholar of outstanding gifts. The Renaissance believed ancient Egypt held the most powerful magic, which had seemed lost forever until Ficino's translation with commentary. He had brought magic into the intellectual mainstream where it would stay for more than two centuries. Ficino also wrote important works on astrology, a multi-volume work on Platonic Theology, and hundreds of brilliant public

letters on a variety of subjects. He inspired the young Pico della Mirandola, who created Christian Cabala, another magical innovation that would inspire both poets and scholars through the next two centuries.

Our first combined set of volumes focuses on the two great Elizabethan playwrights, William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. Both authors used Platonism, Neo-Platonism, and magic in a wide and interesting variety of ways. We analyze two dozen Shakespeare plays and all the plays by Marlowe. We discuss the narrative poems of both poets. We do not mention Shakespeare's sonnets because we published a previous book on the sonnets and Renaissance magic with Edwin Mellen Press in 1995.

At the close of this first two-volume offering, we have provided an extensive, descriptive bibliography of over 175 titles that should prove useful for our entire Ficino project. We do not feel the need to repeat this in subsequent volumes.

Our second set of volumes will include Spenser, Donne, Milton, Sidney, Wyatt, Jonson, Marvell, and Herbert. The important women poets of Elizabethan times are discussed. We will study specialized alchemical poetry with the critical tools necessary for accurate readings. We will also look closely at English emblem poems, the magical belief system behind them, and the poems they contain.

Our third set of volumes will include several of the English pre-Romantics, Shelley, Blake, Keats, and Coleridge. We will not forget the important women poets of this splendid age. The great German poet Goethe was strongly influenced by Ficino and we do want to look closely at this. Our final poet is W. B. Yeats, who died in 1939 and interested himself in all matters occult. Ficino's long reach had at last come to Ireland.

Volume I

Chapter One:

Ancient Egypt Meets Renaissance Florence

Thoth

The legend persists. In 1453 Christian Byzantium falls to the invading Turks. This is not a book about battles but literary texts. A nameless monk escaped from the flaming city with a leather satchel of sacred writings by the Egyptian high priest named Thoth. These writings had been missing from Western Europe for over a millennium. Thoth was not an ordinary priest; he was the founder of Egyptian writing, the mysteriously puzzling hieroglyphics which Europeans were frantically eager to translate but with no success. After Thoth invented writing, he took dictation from a monotheistic supreme being called Pymander and Europeans considered these texts—whatever they might be—the world's first divine revelation, and thereby precious beyond all price. The ancient Egyptians revered Thoth and portrayed him in sandstone statues as a tall man with perfect ramrod posture and the head of an ibis bird. Europeans could never quite figure out the ibis bird, but they were certain it contained deep spiritual meaning.

Europeans believed Thoth had lived before Moses, so perhaps Moses could have learned from him. Other Europeans believed Thoth and Moses had lived at the same time so they could have known and influenced each other. The common Quattrocento belief was only two sacred languages existed: Egyptian hieroglyphics and Hebrew. This idea relies on theology, not linguistics. God had spoken Hebrew to Moses, and hieroglyphics to Thoth—hence the Deity had only uttered these two languages, and they alone could be called sacred. A few Europeans believed Thoth and Moses were the same person, though this opinion was a tiny minority.

We do not want to forget our monk fleeing crumbling Byzantium with his satchel of Thoth's writing. What he carried close to his chest would influence Europe—poetry, painters, cosmologists, alchemists—for two and a half centuries. An occult revival in 1900, centering on the great Irish poet Yeats, would show Thoth had never been quite forgotten.

However, the ancient Greeks, presumably living several centuries before Christ, had a significant part to play in Thoth's ever-growing reputation. Greek philosophers traveled to Egypt, the original source of all occult or supernal wisdom. Please note we are now talking legend, not fact. The Greeks held Thoth's writings in reverent awe, and thereby translated every sacred word into Greek. Then they went home with their newfound treasure. Back in Athens, the Greeks decided to call Thoth after their god with the winged feet—Hermes—ah, but Thoth was so much more powerful and profound than Hermes, at least three times greater, and the great Egyptian became forever known in Greece as Thrice-Great Hermes or Hermes Trismegistus. This latter name is how our hero is usually known throughout the Renaissance and therefore in scholarly texts. Mention simply

Trismegistus, or Mercurius, and the reader knows whom you mean.

Our fleeing monk with the previous satchel wanted to sell his manuscript to the highest bidder, and that could only be Cosimo de Medici, ruler of the city state of Florence. Cosimo was known far and wide as a patron of the arts, with a special interest in theology and classical studies. Our monk arrived in Florence with his treasure in 1463. We are now moving away from legend to fact. We have no idea why the monk required ten years to travel from Byzantium to Florence. Travel was slow in those days, but no where near that slow. Maybe he worried what he carried was stolen goods and hoped he had at last found in Cosimo a patron who would gladly pay him rather than turn him in. This must be idle speculation, but we do know Cosimo was thrilled beyond measure at the treasure in the satchel. He would pay whatever necessary, for Hermes Trismegistus had at last been found, in a good clean Greek copy, and Cosimo had just the man to make the translation from Greek to Latin. In the satchel a new evangelist had been found. Cosimo would react that way, and so would most of Europe for 250 years.

Cosimo knew he had but a short time to live, and he believed the precious words of Thrice-Great Hermes could provide an extraordinary preparation for the next life. But Cosimo did not read Greek, not a word, and this was true for most Western Europeans in the mid Quattrocento. Cosimo was not dismayed, not for a moment, for he was a patron and thereby overlord of a brilliant young Greek scholar named Marsilio Ficino. Ficino is the hero of this tale of the recovered manuscript, as well as the subsequent chapters of this volume, the first in a series of three volumes that study Ficino's profound, lasting influence on English literature. Ficino also

inspired many passages in Goethe, as the third volume will explicate. He has never been far from the mainstream of European cultural studies. In this first volume, we focus on Ficino's influence on Shakespeare and Marlowe, plus a wonderful comedy by Ben Johnson called, *The Alchemist*. Ficino's influence is never stronger than on alchemical practices and alchemical writings, and we shall look closely at those.

In this first volume, we shall give a complete and thorough study of Ficino's many facets—like Leonardo, who walked the same Florentine streets at the same time, he was the true Renaissance man—as well as individual chapters on the several important thinkers who could not have developed their thoughts without first pondering Ficino. By our study of Ficino and his followers in Volume One, we shall not need to repeat the material in the subsequent two volumes. Volume Two will focus on Sidney, Spenser, Donne, Marvell, and Milton. Volume Three centers on the great English romantics—Shelley's Platonism, Blake's mysticism, Coleridge's lifetime devotion to Ficino—and the awesome figure of Goethe, before concluding with W. B. Yeats, the last major poet to be strongly impacted by Thrice-Great Hermes.

We should note this first volume covers Shakespeare's plays and two long dramatic poems. This author has already published a volume with The Edwin Mellen Press (1995) about the impact of Ficino and several others on the Shakespeare sonnets titled, *Renaissance Magic and Hermeticism in the Shakespeare Sonnets*, Studies in Renaissance Literature, Volume 9. Consequently the sonnets will not be mentioned in this volume.

We return to Cosimo de Medici, holding the precious Hermetic manuscript in his hands and feeling worrisome about

his own death. What happens next is the true story, perhaps, that sounds like legend. Either way, Cosimo rushed the Greek manuscript into Ficino's hands with the urgent command to translate it immediately. Ficino, only thirty, already had a project. He was translating ten dialogues of Plato from Greek into Latin, thereby making them accessible to European readers for the first time since Rome fell. Ficino sensed the vital importance of what he was doing and preferred to continue.

However, Cosimo would have none of it. The grand Medici wanted to know the full contents of those Hermetic books, every phrase, every word. In ten months Ficino had completed translating the manuscript from the monk's satchel. The results were fourteen treatises and a separate piece called *Asclepius*. Cosimo was relieved. Death approached. He was delighted, also grateful. While lying on his death bed in 1464, Ficino could read the complete Hermetic corpus to him. One might wonder whey Cosimo did not choose the Gospels—many comforting words there—but no, he wanted Thoth, and the legend concludes that he died happily.

Ficino would live on forty-six years. He would translate the complete works of Plato from Greek to Latin with numerous commentaries, an extraordinary accomplishment. His Latin Plato would be read well into the nineteenth century, while a few of his commentaries are still read today. He wrote a major philosophical work in eighteen short sections titled, *Platonic Theology*, which sought to define and prove the human immortal soul, and which attempted to reconcile Plato with Christianity. He translated and wrote on the Neo-Platonists of the late Roman Empire—Plotinus, Iamblichus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Porphyry, Proclus—and single-handedly introduced them to the Quattrocento, where they have had dutiful followers

ever since. He wrote texts on practical magic that would reverberate for the next two centuries, and find a temporary rebirth in W. B. Yeats. We shall provide chapters on each of these accomplishments. The Renaissance would not have been the same without Ficino. Yet, with this extraordinary range of undertakings, nothing Ficino did would ever have the lasting power or impact of those translations he made when he was twenty, called the *Corpus Hermetica*. A close study of the *Corpus* shall receive a chapter, relying on the excellent English translation by Brian Copenhaver.

For over fifteen decades, eager readers of *Corpus Hermeticum* believed they were connecting with the actual words God had spoken to Thoth. No other Renaissance writing could compare to that. Trismegistus had been a traditional father figure of alchemy, though with only legends and the vague words of the Emerald Tablet to support this. This Tablet talked of how the microcosm could relate to powers above, and this was certainly useful for alchemy, but not enough to send men scrambling to build and equip labs. The *Corpus Hermetica* provided lasting conversations with Trismegistus that made alchemy quite possible—nature was meant to be explored, delved into, examined, and written about. To Frances A. Yates, the brilliant scholar of Renaissance magic, Trismegistus held man up to a higher level, exalted his dignity as a human, and made bold, original scientific ventures possible. This concept is called the Yates Thesis by historians of science, which provide Yates with supporters and detractors. Either way Dame Frances has made it impossible to read the *Corpus Hermetica* in old familiar ways, which is a primary lasting goal of scholarship. Surely the young Ficino did not quite know what he was getting into when he started translating.

Ficino's translation of Plato had a profound impact because of its completeness. This might be taken for granted today—sure, you translate everything the man wrote—but Ficino was a trailblazer in carrying that out. He became the first European scholar to grasp and understand the entirety of Plato. Hence he could make innumerable interconnections because he knew the canon so thoroughly well. His commentaries could reflect on other commentaries. He could challenge the Platonic reader in new and different ways. Prior to Ficino, scholars considered each Platonic dialogue had a single philosophical point or scholio, and essays were written to develop this point. Ficino changed this method. Plato's dialogues were much too rich, subtly wise, complex for such a simplistic treatment. To read Plato was to read all of Plato. An intelligent person would read isolated sections of the Bible, analyze, and leave it at that. The same held for Plato.

Ficino would always choose the Bible—he did mean to keep his head on his shoulders—but he considered Plato to be a close second to Scripture. He did not live to see the Reformation when he would have endured considerable difficulty. Ficino believed Socrates was an intensely worthy figure, second in admiration only to Christ. With such remarks, it is a wonder Ficino did not offend more people, but his sacred concept of Plato never did get him in serious trouble. He lived in the Florence that burned Savonarola. No evidence exists that Ficino ever felt his hands tremble, his fingers warm.

This fact becomes all the more remarkable when one reads the eighteen, short, compact books of Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, which he wrote from 1469 to 1474 and published in the latter year. He might have started out to reconcile Plato with Christ, an attempt that alone ought to have gotten him into

trouble, but this original opus becomes Ficino's many-sided proof that human beings have an immortal soul. He starts by discussing mystical processes that can bring the soul close to God without leaving the body and thereby without death. These processes are all Platonic, as the aspirant contemplates a figure of earthly beauty, often another person of rare beauty, and lets those thoughts uplift him to the Platonic Ideal Form of Beauty, which is next to God. Plotinus is supposed to have accomplished this four times in his life. Ficino never acknowledges doing it once. Though he deeply believes.

Contemplation is a favorite word and technique with Ficino. An earthbound human can never put his time to better use than divine Platonic contemplation. Ficino brings in famous Christian names like Origen and Augustine, both Platonists, to support his position. He deftly inserts these names, with appropriate quotes from these early Christian masters, and he is wise to do so, but Ficino monopolizes the term contemplation, and so he becomes the *de facto* expert.

His contemplation is the highest and most viable form of prayer or meditation, and he learned it from a pagan author. Renaissance people often worried whatever happened to Plato in the after life, and Ficino largely caused this. He learned contemplation from Diotima, a woman speaker near the close of Plato's *Symposium*. Diotima is the moving language of prose-poetry which exalts the human who can step-by-step lift his thoughts from mundane beauty to divine beauty to God, the source of all beauty. Platonic love has an awkward, ridiculous sound these days, but Diotima is the original source, and Ficino would find nothing less than magnificent about her.

Ficino has explicated divine contemplation—now hold that thought. If humans can ascent as high as Diotima says,

these humans hold an imperishable dignity, and God would be unjust to permit this dignity without also providing those humans with an immortal soul. Therefore, all humans possess an immortal soul. This is not logic that David Hume or Kant would have been proud of, but Ficino finds it perfectly suited to his needs. Diotima's ascension is such a splendid, enduring, contemplative process, that what else could it be leading to or foreshadowing than life everlasting, the only proper conclusion for the philosophic soul. Anything less would be unjust, and Ficino shouts from the rooftops that our heavenly father can never be unjust. Ficino might not have noticed this one time God trumps Plato, probably because Plato—almost a Christian but not quite—truly believed in an immortal soul, as exemplified by his myth of Er in the tenth book of *The Republic*. Ficino maintained a risky balancing act, but he knew and trusted his belief system, and could neither deny God nor Plato.

Plato has much more to say about the soul in *Platonic Theology*. The soul is part of a divine hierarchy, and the term hierarchy shall be used throughout this book, from Ficino to his several philosophical followers, to Shakespeare and Marlowe. Also called the great chain of being, the belief of hierarchy, supernal and otherwise, is a cornerstone of Renaissance belief. It starts here. Of course Ficino learned it from the several ancient authors he translated, most notably Pseudo-Dionysius, but for the Quattrocento, it starts here.

The microcosm-macrocosm concept is deeply embedded in hierarchy. Shakespeare and Marlowe seldom analyze hierarchical concepts; instead they used it, over and over, for it was such a strong unquestioned part of their belief system that it required no explication or justification. A person cannot follow

Diotima's ascension process towards Platonic love without an upward hierarchy of values in place, with the lowly earthly values moving up towards divine. Metals could not grow within the earth without the sun and moon shining down on them.

In his *Platonic Theology*, Ficino concentrates on two overlapping hierarchies—cosmic and individual. He is a Neo-Platonist when he depicts God moving from heaven to earth and back again. What matters to Ficino is the human soul is the center of the universe, and will enjoy a privileged strategic station in this divine journey. Ficino is now entering the area of Neo-Platonism where language is not quite adequate to explain the action. But this will not surprise Ficino, who has already learned from Pseudo-Dionysius and Nicholaus of Cusa that human language will always fall short in describing the divine.

Ficino does keep his feet firmly on the ground by providing a firm hierarchy of five locations for God to move through: God of course starts in heaven, his eternal home, next reaches the immortal human soul, the center of the cosmos; below this soul are two terms which belong only to Ficino, quality and body. Ficino is a Platonist, always that. Quality is the human apprehension of abstract terms—good, justice, beauty—that reach their true and complete fullness in the Ideal Forms in God's domain. This connection shows an example of Ficino's continual effort to merge Platonism with Christianity. Since he died peacefully in his own bed, his own age believed he did this quite successfully. Ficino's fifth and lowest location is called body, which includes the wide and wonderful array of animals without souls created by God to beautify and enrich the world. The human body at death would also fit this category, which adds emphasis to his immortality of soul.

Ficino was a translator of Plotinus, and thereby greatly admired this major Neo-Platonist. Plotinus developed a similar cosmic hierarchy, but with only four levels—the level of quality is left out. If Plotinus might have been puzzled by quality, so have several others. Perhaps Ficino felt more devotion to Plato than Plotinus and needed to include those Ideal Forms. Perhaps Ficino had a special eye for visual beauty, in his lovely town of Florence, in the great painters his writing inspired, in the imperishable beauty of the human form and face. Ficino wrote a long commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, which concludes with Diotima's stirring appreciation of human beauty, and Ficino was never too far away from these passages. We devote a chapter to this.

Ficino entered a world where the cosmology of Aristotle rules. All objects, plants, trees, mountains, meteorites, below the moon were made of four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water. These were the sublunar objects in a sublunar world. Above the moon was the quintessence, called aether, a pure spiritual substance, which Aristotle could never properly define, and yet he insisted all cosmic wonders above the moon—planets, stars, comets—were made of aether and aether alone. This view of the cosmos will appear repeatedly in Shakespeare and Marlowe, and their brilliant poetic contemporaries, if only to reject it.

Ficino rejected it. His hierarchical cosmos has no place for Aristotle—aether? Ficino believed God had provided a divine infusion in each section or particle of his creation. Of course the stars and planets were divine, but so were humans and beasts, every bird and creeping thing, plants and metals growing within the earth. If aether is supernal, then, hey, Aristotle, all is aether. Farewell, Aristotle—hello, Quattrocento.

This time Ficino's dominant influence was Thrice-Great Hermes, who preached the divinity of all creation. This concept obviously attracted Ficino, as well as Cosimo on his deathbed, and countless devoted readers till the close of the seventeenth century.

Ficino, not content with cosmic hierarchy, presented a division of value within the soul. The influence of Plato is strong, who also felt the need to divide the soul into different parts. Ficino also was influenced by Macrobius, a wide-ranging, sometimes incoherent Neo-Platonist in the late Roman Empire, as will be discussed in a separate chapter. But ultimately the choice of five divisions of soul was Ficino's. Not surprisingly, those five divisions must be divided in two—the higher soul or anima prima, which takes in Reason and Mind, and the lower soul or anima secunda, which includes the soul's three lowest sections; propagation, nourishment, and growth. Obviously Ficino is describing a soul still connected to the body, for it contains physical processes. The higher soul takes the pathway to heaven, with Reason and Mind the essential guides. Future poets would never cease dividing the soul into parts, and Ficino is hardly the only influence, but his input has the importance of being clearly stated and early in the day.

It all fits so neat and tidy and this presents our problem. Neither Aristotle nor Ficino had the slightest proof for their cosmic systems. The only reason all that aether was up there above the moon was because Aristotle said it was. The only reason the human soul is the center of the cosmos is Ficino said so. Take your pick. Whatever your intuition indicates most comfortable for you is what you choose, or you can slice and dice and trust components of both—the Quattrocento did this. They added numerous other thinkers to pick and choose from. It

was the very nature of their age to be eclectic—and here we find the basic disagreement between Aristotle and Ficino, and why Ficino was destined for the next several centuries to carry the day. Aristotle did not go away easily, but go away he did.

In *Platonic Theology*, Ficino is eclectic. He draws on several sources from several ages. He honors his sources, Christian and pagan. He gives due credit to them. For all his brilliance, he always comes across as a humble student of what he is doing. This makes him a man of the Quattrocento, highly respected, with devoted readers from Giordano Bruno to Samuel Taylor Coleridge to W. B. Yeats. Aristotle is an entirely different man, whose only serious source is himself. A person can doubt a part of Ficino and still support the whole, because the whole is so well supported. But to doubt a basic concept of Aristotle is to cast doubt on his entire corpus. If his aether is nonsense, if laws above the moon are the same above as below, then it is high time to challenge his entire corpus, which had dominated universities in Western Europe for half a millennium. Aristotle's style of boundless know-it-all confidence dominates, and that style alone would encourage prolonged challenge in the long century after Ficino. Galileo is the most famous challenger, but far from the only one.

Ficino never dominated anyone, neither in his personal speech or writing. He formed a new Platonic Academy with the intention of members sharing wisdom as friends and equal brothers. Aristotle never considered himself the equal of anyone. Ficino was a short man, with a very slight hunchback, who spoke with an occasional stammer. Yet he spoke with quiet eloquence, seeking to form the right questions rather than persuade by domination. His concept of the soul is based on his deep faith both in Christ and Plato. He was both priest and

medical doctor. A generation later he would influence the physician Paracelsus—another chapter. Ficino believed virtuous men should not be all that eager to enter heaven—surely they would get there eventually—because they could accomplish so much good while still on earth. The Buddhist concept of the bodhisattva comes to mind. Ficino quietly believed he was privately blessed with small prophetic powers.

Ficino chose a month in 1484 to have *Platonic Theology* published because Jupiter and Saturn would be in conjunction. He would not live long enough for another such favorable astrology. His astrological medicine is so influential that this volume requires two chapters to discuss it. The Medici family fell from power in Florence in 1494, and Ficino then maintained a low profile in retiring to the suburbs of the only city he had ever called home. The Medici's had been his patron for over four decades. Ficino died in 1499. In 1512 the Catholic Church declared the immortality of soul was dogma. Ficino would have been deeply pleased, though not at all surprised.

Chapter Two:

The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus

Emerald Tablet

Before Ficino finished his brilliant translation of *The Hermetica* in 1464, perhaps a thousand years before, perhaps a quarter of a century longer, a large tablet of stone existed with a collection of occult, spiritual aphorisms that were attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. This tablet is shrouded in legend, but moved through the Middle Ages to Ficino's time—constantly read and commented on—under the sobriquet, The Emerald Tablet.

Our study of Thrice-Great Hermes could never be complete without the Emerald Tablet, and so we quote this work in full. It is brief. We must read it carefully; it will influence every chapter on Shakespeare and Marlowe.

It is the foundation of the microcosm-macrocosm concept, which dominated poetry throughout the Renaissance. Basic alchemical imagery comes from this tablet, as well as the power of fire so essential to alchemy.

Emerald Tablet

True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing.

And as all things were by contemplation of one, so all things arose from this one thing by a single act of adaptation.

The father thereof is the Sun, the mother is the Moon.

The wind carried it in its womb, the earth is the nurse thereof.

It is the father of all works of wonder throughout the whole world.

The power thereof is perfect.

If it be cast on to earth, it will separate the element of earth from that of fire, the subtle from the gross.

With great sagacity it doth ascent gently from earth to heaven.

Again it doth descent to earth, and uniteth in itself the force from things superior and things inferior.

Thus thou wilt possess the glory of the brightness of the whole world, and all obscurity will fly far from thee.

This thing is the strong fortitude of all strength, for it overcometh every subtle thing and doth penetrate every solid substance.

Thus was the world created.

Hence will there be marvelous adaptions achieved, of which the manner is this.

For this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistus, because I hold three parts of the wisdom of the whole world.

That which I had to say about the operation of Sol is completed.

Chapter Three:

The Hermetica

We have recounted the famous story in 1463 of Cosimo de Medici handing the *Corpus Hermetica* to Ficino to be translated. A year later Ficino was finished. For the next two hundred years, no work that left Ficino's writing table would prove so highly influential to so many distinguished Renaissance figures in such a strange and wondrous multiplicity of ways. Ficino translated from Greek to Latin, but he fully trusted his texts were composed in long ago Egypt by a semi-divine holy man named Thoth, revered by his fellow Egyptians as the father of hieroglyphic writing and the source of mystical-magical supernatural powers of vast endurance.

Ficino shared these beliefs, as did the twenty decades that followed him when the Greeks, living far before Homer and Hesiod, visited Egypt to study under Thoth, they were convinced what Thoth told them. Thoth was the first human to learn language because he was the first human God had spoken to and thereby taught. Hence this oldest of languages must be the most pure and holy, the closest to God. Ficino had no doubts of this, and fifteen decades later, these beliefs were shared by

Giordano Bruno, who tragically paid for his sacred linguistics with his life.

Ficino formed a dictum—a human language could only be considered holy or sacred, with possible innate magical powers, if God had used this language to speak to humans. Ficino pondered the deep meanings of his all-or-nothing concept, and decided only two languages in all human history held this special holiness—the Egyptian hieroglyphics spoken by God to Thoth and the Old Testament Hebrew spoken by God to Abraham and Moses, especially Moses who might have been a contemporary of Thoth or lived soon after him. If any teaching was done, it was Moses who learned from Thoth. Ficino never considered it could be the other way around. Thoth must always be the prophet and teacher. He could learn from God and learn abundantly, but no human, not of so exalted a rank as Moses, could take him further.

A rare Renaissance scholar would ponder if Thoth and Moses were one and the same, but this idea never took hold. Yet the mere fact that such an idea could even take place in Christian Europe, with always the abundant spiritual possibilities around the next corner, shows the reverence and trust that Christians could feel for Thoth. This did not happen without early Renaissance Christians finding predictions in Thoth of their one true faith, as well as strong similarities between the creation accounts of Thoth and Moses. The evidence, though not carefully studied and sifted, was slowly mounting that Moses had learned much from Egypt's son of Pymander named Tat—a rather odd, if catchy nickname—who must be divine, and this father-son dichotomy has strong echoes in Christianity.

If the early Renaissance Christians are overreaching, perhaps desperately so, their motivations are not hard to find. Ficino's translations of Thoth produced a wondrously appealing mysticism, a deep spiritual piety that would assuredly increase the reader's faith in faith, his own and others, and bring a settled contentment to his life; days on earth may be harsh and brutal, lonely and afraid, but better days will follow, glorious enriching days that shall endure like the cosmos, as Thoth has promised.

No Renaissance thinker asked why this had yet to occur. Unlike the New Testament, Thoth contained no violent either/or apocalyptic content, and Christians felt grateful about Thoth's slow, steady, graceful march to a steadfast salvation—compared to the shrieking, blood and terror of John's Revelations. Thoth's sub-structure is that humans are basically good, quite good, and God shall reward this, gladly, gratefully, with the divine attitude that whirling rivers of fiery blood belong in poetry, not life.

We need to be Platonists for a decisive paragraph and define our terms. Thoth referred to his God as Poimandres or Pymander. These names will show up several times in the impassioned writing of Giordano Bruno. Ficino passed his baton to many important figures, but none more influential or brilliantly original than Bruno. Moses of course called his supreme being Yahweh or Jehovah

Greek scholars living long before Plato traveled to Egypt to study with Thoth or to study Thoth's writings after the great scribe had entered the Egyptian paradise. Egyptians portrayed Thoth in art, more statues than wall paintings, as a tall thin man with the head of an ibis beak. The ibis is an Egyptian bird. We can only guess what the puzzled Greeks thought of this beak. If Frances Yates has not explained it, it would seem unlikely the Greek tourists latched onto a correct meaning—for

when they got back home, exalted and quietly triumphant from all they had learned, they never set down an explanation of Thoth's head. But they had learned the secrets of the cosmos from Thoth, and this was no small matter. Later Greek thinkers, like the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle, would be powerfully influenced.

The Greeks decided on their own name for Thoth—Hermes—after the swiftly moving planet, also called Mercury, and associated with copper. Hence Thoth could also be called Mercurius, and this often happens in Ficino's writings. It would never occur to his audience that this name required clarification. But those long ago Greeks realized Thoth was far greater than Hermes, and since they liked giving out names, they welcomed this new challenge. Rather arbitrarily, they decided Thoth was three times greater than the ordinary skybound Hermes—thus Thoth would be forever known in Greek culture, and later throughout the Renaissance, as Thrice-Great Hermes or Hermes Trismegistus. His son is called Tat, presumably a nickname. He has a friend called Hammon, of whom we know no more than the name.

The character Asclepius requires a more precise and detailed presentation. Since we are using Brian P. Copenhaver's excellent English translations of *Corpus Hermetica* and *Asclepius*, both rising from mid-century Florence to become the two most influential treatises on magic throughout the Renaissance, we shall also, gratefully, make use of Professor Copenhaver's textual apparatus, as we do with his full descriptions of Asclepius (Brian P. Copenhaver, translator and editor, *Hermetica*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 124, 125). Asclepius, we find, is a significant figure in the *Hermetica*, for he is mentioned twenty times altogether in the

second, sixth, ninth, and tenth Greek treatises. Greek is the language from which Ficino will translate into Latin. In the *Asclepius*, a Latin Treatise, passed down through the middle ages, often secretly, the name Asclepius shows up forty-two times.

We need to quote Copenhaver's textual apparatus to identify Asclepius, no easy manner.

The original Asclepius was Imhotep, an official of the Third Dynasty whose fame in medicine, architecture, writing, astrology and other arts caused other generations to deify him and treat him as a son of Ptah and grandson of the great Thoth ... Eventually the Greek-speaking population of Egypt identified him with Asclepius, son of Apollo and God of Healing ... The Greek Asclepius was pre-eminently a God of Healing, shown with shoes and chiton in statuary to emphasize his human origins—Christians saw him as a rival to Christ, whom he somewhat resembled as merciful healer. (p. 123)

Copenhaver does not distinguish which Asclepius appears in *Hermetica* or the work bearing his own name, but all indications from those two texts convey a human. He might be a human with extraordinary powers, but still human. He can describe the cosmos but not control it. He is prophet and poet, two conjoined identities not requiring the supernatural.

But two languages, according to Ficino and his many followers, are supernal—Egyptian hieroglyphics and Hebrew—because these are the only two languages God used in directly addressing humans. Hermes Trismegistus received the hieroglyphics, still untranslatable in Ficino's time, and many

honored Old Testament figures were spoken to by Yahweh in Hebrew. This sacredness of hieroglyphics, the original tongue of Ficino's *Hermetica*, adds a powerful pious intensity to the many treatises.

The Hebrew of Moses, author of the Old Testament's five opening books, a fact not doubted in Ficino's time, is given a similar sacredness to Thoth's tongue.

This unwavering fact made Cabalah possible among Renaissance Christians. This could not have been expected, and derived from the sole influence of Pico della Mirandola, a young student and admiring friend of Ficino, a brilliant scholar of several languages including Hebrew and, most importantly, a practicing Christian. We will return to Cabalah in our chapter on Pico. Trying to define Cabalah in a few sentences is nigh impossible, but it does involve intense reverence for the Hebrew tongue, various methods of manipulations of Hebrew words, with the resulting intense meditation on key passages of the Old Testament.

Pico, a true genius in learning languages, mastered all aspects of Cabalah by his mid twenties, and thereby could introduce his favorite subject to Christian Europe. The result was, for the next fifteen decades, from 1480 to 1630, Christians studied Hebrew in ever growing numbers so they could practice the established sacred forms of Cabalah. Cabalah had now firmly entered the ever growing stream of Renaissance magical practices. With alchemy and astrology many sources can be found, but with Christian Cabalah there is Pico, only Pico.

Copenhaver's splendid volume provides an English translation of *Asclepius* after *Hermetica*. Yes, these are major works of cosmic powers related to magic, but another major reason indicates why they should appear beside each other.

Asclepius was held in a low opinion during the middle ages or for several centuries before Ficino tackled Thrice-Great Hermes. Hence *Asclepius* had to be read in secret, by so-called black magicians held in high disfavor by the church which attempted to control and dominate the minds of all members, by ferocious force if necessary.

Before Ficino, it took a brave man to stay up late at night, all doors locked, all shades drawn, reading *Asclepius*, page by forbidden page, by the pale light of a small fluttering candle. Our reader might trust his friends and neighbors about most things, but not that. Should he be caught, his deep study of *Asclepius* might be his last pain-free act on this planet. Obviously *Asclepius* had to contain significant, precious, supernal material, available no other place, to take this risk.

But with the publication of Ficino's *Hermetica*, in a smooth Latin style, accessible to all educated men in Italy and soon western Europe, the cosmic-wide range of magic entered people's belief system: strong though forced connections between Hermes Trismegistus and early Christianity could be found and freely spoken of, and the magus was now regarded, if he vowed to practice only the right kinds of magic, the white magic which brings souls closer to God, as a spiritual leader, no longer the black sorcerers or necromancers of Satan's evil workshop of medieval centuries, who held the opposing goal of turning souls away from their Creator.

Ficino stood squarely in the middle of a total turnabout of Renaissance attitudes towards magic. His *Hermetica* had proved a success beyond his grandest expectations. His readers, at long last, believed they were in direct contact with Hermes Trismegistus, after anticipating this great event for centuries, a millennium. No work was to benefit more from this than

Asclepius. If the right kind of magic was allowed, a magic infused with intense piety and cosmic wonders, then surely *Asclepius* must be allowed. It was not only allowed but pounced on. The printing press was now available. Copies of Ficino did not fly off the press but the invention helped. What helped Ficino would also help *Asclepius*. The Quattrocento would close with two powerfully magical volumes almost too wondrous to behold. Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* made the third work, and this shall be discussed in our chapter on Pico.

We cannot forget a fourth and final volume that enters our foundation and required Ficino's translation talents—the *Timaeus* by Plato, the only Platonic dialogue that attempts to answer ultimate cosmological, teleological, and ontological questions. Thanks to the mighty influence of Ficino, the *Timaeus* was read throughout the Renaissance. Without it, astrology and alchemy could not have been so easily believed.

Our task for the rest of this chapter will be to work our way, step by step, treatise by treatise, through the *Hermetica*, by far Ficino's most influential work.

Next we move in the same slow, careful way through *Asclepius*. At any time we find useful comparisons with the *Timaeus*, we will insert them. We are about to take on a trio of works not noted for literary greatness—Plato is never more confused or contradictory than in *Timaeus*—but for their ever growing influences on literary works that hold greatness. Otherwise our quest is vain. Otherwise we are still the medieval alchemists, plodding away endlessly to turn dull green copper into bright illuminating gold.

Treatise I: Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus – Poimandres

Hermes starts this first treatise feeling sluggish, “like someone heavy with sleep from too much eating or toil of the body.” This greatest of all ancient minds does not seem promising—Poimandres, the Egyptian deity, appears and looks “completely unbounded.” We have capitalized God in Copenhaver’s translations because Ficino’s audience would have read the deity’s name with a capital letter. Poimandres needs to introduce himself but his brief description should have done it for him. He will engage Hermes in dialogue. This will often be the Hermetic method, so often like the Platonic method.

A rare exception in Plato is the *Timaeus*, where the title character talks non-stop for the final four-fifths of the dialogue. Dialogue might not be the right word. Not even Socrates interrupts the excessively long-winded Timaeus, and Socrates is adept at interrupting most people. But Timaeus is allowed to talk because he has rare credentials, a man of vast scientific learning from Locri, a small backwater in Italy. Socrates and his companions might feel they are indeed fortunate to hear him.

Timaeus will do for his small, captivated audience what Poimandres will do for Thrice-Great Hermes: explicate the cosmos. Tall order? Try to think of one more challenging, or more riveting to hear, or more likely to fail. Timaeus and Poimandres are vowing to illuminate the eternal cosmic issues that indeed have always puzzled man and always shall.

“I am Poimandres,” says the Egyptian god,
“mind of sovereignty; I know what you want,
and I am with you everywhere.”

Timaeus cannot promise all of that, but what he knows might be more valuable. Poimandres and Timaeus are both poets, but Timaeus has studied geometry, musical harmony, and human anatomy. Poimandres does not know these subjects because he does not feel the need to. Timaeus refers to an all-too-distant deity and a subordinate creator called, Demiurge. Poimandres is all the God whom Egypt or the known world requires. But he will require an assistant, a master cosmic craftsman, evoking a strong parallel with Timaeus

Timaeus' deity is far too spiritual to get his magnificent hands messy with any acts of creation, so he simply sits back in his heavens and allows Demiurge to take care of all that—obviously this is myth, far more than science. Medieval Christians, who struggled mightily to make Plato a divine forerunner of Christianity, saw Demiurge as a Christ figure, a creator similar to the opening of John's Gospel, and a son to his father, that ever distant Greek deity. This is the theology of forcing square pegs into round holes, but many medieval churchmen and theologians accepted it. They were ready to accept even more with Thrice-Great Hermes.

Hermes is given an impressive poetic vision as soon as Poimandres has promised, "I will teach you." Let Hermes speak:

Saying this he changed his appearance, and in an instant everything was immediately opened to me. I saw an endless vision in which everything became light—clear and joyful—and in seeing the vision I came to love it. After a little while, darkness arose separately and descended—fearful and gloomy—coiling sinuously so that it looked to me like a <snake>. Then the darkness

changed into something of a watery nature, indescribably agitated and smoking like a fire; it produced an unspeakable wailing roar. Then an inarticulate cry like the voice of fire came forth from it. But from the light—a holy word mounted upon the watery nature, and the untempered fire leapt up from the watery nature to the height above. The fire was nimble and piercing and active as well, and because the air was light it followed after the spirit and rose up to the fire away from earth and water so that it seemed suspended from the fire. Earth and water stayed behind, mixed with one another, so that earth could not be distinguished from water, but they were stirred to hear by the spiritual word that moved upon them.

We quoted this entire passage or speech by Hermes so we can imagine the strong, powerful impact it had on readers in 1470. The God of Moses was revealing wonders to Thoth, the great scribal demi-god of Egypt, the minor deity who introduced writing. Therefore no Renaissance reader would be surprised that Thoth saw so clearly or wrote so well. He obviously influenced both Plato and Aristotle, the other great ones, with his lucid account of the four elements. But Thoth has wisely inserted the spiritual and considerable magic, which the two later Greeks often left out.

This struggle between physical and material will come to influence legions of poets, as they work out blendings and discrepancies between appearance and reality. The alchemist will also look deeply into *Timaeus* and *Hermetica* for what he needs. People do not read these two works and simply set them

aside. They were catalysts to further adventures in thought and creativity. The great painters in late Quattrocento Florence—Leonardo, Botticelli, and later Raphael—might have composed their works quite differently without the numerous Ficino translations stubbornly nudging their mind-sets. If Poimandres opens by implanting a cosmic vision into Thoth, then the imaginations of poets and painters must seek out their own visions, original concepts of words and forms, to bring forth illumination in manners not beheld before. Of course *Timaeus* and *Hermetica* were not the only inspirations, but they were major. Creative people pondered over them like sacred writ. God spoke to Thoth and perhaps God could also speak to them.

Thrice-Great Hermes is curious about his vision, and listens closely while Poimandres explains: “I am the light you saw, mind, your god, who existed before the watery nature that appeared out of the darkness. The lingering word who comes from mind in the son of god.”

You can be sure Renaissance Christians jumped for joy and did handstands over this powerful phrase, “the son of god.” What this meant, what it could only mean, was the first time God spoke to man, he spoke of Jesus. Early Christian theologians—Lactantius and the mighty Augustine—had defined *Hermetica* as an ancient Egyptian foreshadowing of Christ. *Hermetica* was therefore safe for Christians, non-heretical, a special treasure from a special past. A strong support for the Christian Trinity, or two parts of it, next comes from Poimandres, “that in you which sees and hears is the word of the lord, but your mind is god the father; they are not divided from one another for their union in life.” The mysticism that runs throughout *Hermetica* has begun; man and god are forever united as one. Mysticism, of whatever monotheistic faith, can

achieve or sustain no greater height. The sublime has been stated so simply.

The evangelist Thoth next has another vision, which commences when Poimandres raises his head: "But when he raised his head, I saw in my mind the light of powers beyond number and a boundless cosmos that had come to be." In a hundred years, the boundless cosmos will be lifted from this text by Giordano Bruno and transformed into a major part of his thought.

Poimandres next slowly defines a little of that cosmos, though first defining himself as an androgyn, requiring a second mind, a craftsman, quite similar to Timaeus' Demiurge, with seven planets moving in circles, and the entire strange project governed by fate. If god had not said all this, it would not be taken seriously. Thoth's god, by western European standards, is a bit eccentric. If we read carefully, and so we must, that craftsman is necessary for the Hermetic genesis is about to start and Pymander, like Plato's god, clearly cannot do it alone.

A mystic fuzziness exists about Poimandres' genesis. Air brings forth winged things, obviously birds, and water brings forth things that swim, obviously fish. These simplistic statements could be taken from Moses' genesis, and the question lingers why Poimandres has to be an androgyn. Earth brings forth "four-footed beasts, and crawling things, wild animals and tame." Poimandres uttered those words, but they could come from Moses, and this strong coincidence in style and content would again keep Renaissance Christians secure they were not straying from the path in pouring over *Hermetica*. Thoth has told of creation, but, like Moses, he has not explained exactly its mechanics. Rather he has provided no true

explanation at all. Poimandres, like Yahweh, creates by declarative sentence. The painting of Michelangelo's long-bearded Yahweh's simple pointing of his index finger at Adam could come from this. If you have the power, you do not require explications.

Poimandres' original creation of man is accomplished with similar simplicity. Thoth relates, "Mind, the father of all, who is life and light, gave birth to a man like himself whom he loved as his own child." This mind reminds a theologian of the all-creative Logos at the opening of John's Gospel. Creation can be effectively stated, and thereby made to happen, without verbal virtuosity, but truly explicating what occurs when a dull, empty spot in the cosmos suddenly turns into a man, the first man, or the first kangaroo, is beyond Poimandres' vocabulary. Thoth certainly cannot tell us, nor Moses.

Poimandres' original man is an androgyne—no illustrations in word play or drawing exist—and not surprisingly, this creature will devolve into man and woman. Poimandres accomplishes this division as effortlessly and mysteriously as he made man. The genesis sections of Treatise One will be solid material for numerous future variations on the creation theme. *Hermetica* is ultimately about creation, and this largely explains why the next 150 years of poets and painters looked so closely at it, somehow never doubting that all-creating mind was their one true God.

Treatise II

Poimandres removes himself from the second treatise, which leaves Asclepius and Thrice-Great Hermes to discuss problems of motion. Neither has ever taken a course in modern

physics but the Renaissance would not know that. An object can only be moved by another object which is larger or heavier. The planetary spheres are moved by the spheres of the fixed stars. The cosmos is a body, rather a surprise, for a body requires life, and no body can possibly be larger than this cosmos. So far this is basic, common sense knowledge to an ancient Egyptian.

But Hermes Trismegistus suddenly turns metaphysical, difficult to follow, impossible to prove. These are the passages the Renaissance endlessly pondered over because they believed the source was God and therefore had to be true.

Thus, all motion is moved in immobility and by immobility. And it happens that the motion of the cosmos and of every living thing made of matter is produced not by things outside the body but by those within it acting upon the outside, by intelligible entities, either soul or spirit or something else incorporeal. For body does not move ensouled body, nor does it move any body at all, not even the soullness.

We have no idea if Galileo ever read this—born in 1564, an even hundred years after Ficino's translation was complete—but undefined spirits within an object would certainly set his brilliant fledging laws of motion all to pieces. How to measure this soul within the material body? Galileo would have thrown his hands up in utter helplessness. Kepler, always the mystic, might have seriously considered Thrice-Great Hermes knew what he was talking about and got sidetracked once again from the pure mathematical physics for which his name shall be forever honored.

We have deliberately entered this brief sidetrack concerning two major scientists. They worked in the early

seventeenth century, and yet the *Hermetica* would still be easily available to them. Approximately 150 years had passed since Ficino had completed his translation. The strong lasting influence of this enterprise cannot be overemphasized. Galileo, a highly rational man, would not believe Thoth presented the actual words and phrases of God, but so many others did. Ficino would produce immense amounts of work that required far more literary or poetic gifts, far more mastery of ancient languages, but the one and only text he misdated would have a far greater impact than all his other works. Giordano Bruno admired Ficino, but he trusted the words of God which Thoth revealed. Countless scholars believed Plato had learned from Thoth and perhaps also Moses. If Thoth's language was illogical, foggy, ill-conceived, that was part of the all-encompassing wonder.

Returning to Treatise II, Thrice-Great Hermes returns to the four elements of nature—earth, air, water, fire—and emphasizes how these can be changed from one to another. He never mentioned alchemy. In all probability, he had no concept what it was. But his insistence that the elements, the basic forces of matter, could be changed would be confidently, unquestionably used by countless alchemists as the foundation stone in their belief in what they were attempting. If earth could be changed to fire, and then suddenly changed to water, then certainly lead could be transmuted to gold, or if not gold at least silver. By the mid-fifteenth century, alchemy was called the Hermetic art. Greed and Thrice-Great Hermes walked hand in hand. What this shows is the immense importance of even a single, brief passage in Ficino's translation. Ficino's work alone did not connect alchemy with the great Egyptian high priest, for vague, cloudy connecting rumours had drifted haphazardly throughout the middle ages such as the text of the Emerald

Tablet. Back then no authentic text of Hermes was available, and for better or worse, Ficino changed all that. It would be a rare small town in sixteenth century Europe that did not have several men drawn from their household and professional duties to spend long hours before the fires in their alembic, practicing alchemy, the Hermetic art.

Asclepius has difficult questions, the problems that have troubled all theologians and philosophers, and Hermes Trismegistus is prompt to respond. We must never forget that Hermes has been ably instructed by Poimandres or God. The conclusion to Treatise II is packed with vital material. The influence of the Platonic Form of the Good can be found. Hermes sometimes speaks in double paradoxes but he can never be rudely probed nor doubted because he calmly reveals only the highest source.

Asclepius inquires as to the nature of the incorporeal and his master teacher responds, "Mind as a whole wholly enclosing itself, free of all body, unerring, unaffected, untouched, at rest in itself, capable of containing all things and preserving all that exists, and its rays (as it were) are the good, the truth, the archetype of spirit, the archetype of soul." The Christian reader will again be reminded of the Logos at the opening of John's Gospel and, caught up in the grand misdating, perhaps assume the fourth evangelist was strongly influenced by Thoth.

What exactly has Thrice-Great Hermes said about the incorporeal? It cannot be changed, annoyed, or overpowered by the four physical elements. It holds immortality. It is grander than any Platonic concept of soul; hence Plato diluted this influence, though Hermes' good is reminiscent of the Platonic Good, and so Plato appears adept at picking and choosing. Again the Renaissance magical scholar would never consider

that Plato came first. The incorporeal has remarkable life-giving powers, and it prepares the way for the intense piety and mysticism to follow. The incorporeal seems able to preserve the cosmos but not create it, and that leads to Asclepius next pointed question, “What, then, is God?”

Contradictions must result in Hermes’ crucial answer, which of course, he learned from God. Otherwise he would be called onto the carpet for an intense rigorous interrogation. But Hermes keeps pouring out the answers without being challenged. He can only give an extended metaphysical ending to Asclepius’ question, “God is what does not subsist as any of these since he is the cause of their being … And he has left nothing else remaining that is not-being, for all things are those that come to be from things that are, not from those that are not.”

In simplest terms, this is double-talk, not paradox, but Asclepius does not interrupt. Things that are not? Whatever could that possibly mean? Let Hermes continue, “Things that are not do not have a nature that enables them to come to be; their nature is such that they cannot come to be anything.” If Plato invented a concept of negative form, this might be it, but regardless of when Plato lived, nothing like that occurred in his writings. Hermes is talking of an acorn that can never grow into a mighty oak—and why? Because the acorn shall never exist. This provides Poimandres with tremendous, awesome, unearthly power—for he can also keep the mighty oak or shining star from ever existing—and this might be Hermes’ entire point. Be grateful you exist—if for no other reason you revere Poimandres, be grateful you are alive to do so.

Asclepius is quick with the obvious questions, “What do you mean by what never exists?”

Hermes' reply indicates God's all-encompassing power. The deity no longer seems to require an assistant or craftsman. He is getting all the major business done himself. Hermes states, "God is not mind, but he is the cause of mind's being; he is not spirit, but the cause of spirit's being; and he is not light, but the cause of light's being." Plato was fond of precise definitions, and he could labor for pages to find one. This method never occurs to Hermes. The difference between mind and spirit? Neither Asclepius nor the reader has any idea. Did this trouble Ficino, or was he so overwhelmed by the majesty of what he was translating that he did not pause for a second thought? He was translating basic universal concepts, no matter how vaguely, and thus shall always provide deep probing themes for poets. Perhaps Thrice-Great Hermes would have done a little better if he was more of a poet.

Treatise II concludes with both a Platonic and Christian concept for God. Both are strongly stated. God is good, the Platonic Form. Only God contains this good. He is the source and perfection of good. We have found a passage that Plato surely learned from. God is also father, the father of all. This gives him some frame of human personality, which Christian readers would not fail to overlook. The New Testament is one more literary work that feels the profound influence of Thrice-Great Hermes.

Treatise III: A Sacred Discourse of Hermes

With this treatise, the material, sacred or not, starts to repeat itself. Hermes speaks with no direct audience, only the reader silently reading at home. He begins with more prayer than philosophy, "God is the glory of all things." He advocates astrology, "The heavens appeared in seven circles, the gods

became visible in the shapes of the stars and all their constellations.” A Christian reader, including Ficino, would immediately transform those minor gods to angels. “The periphery rotated in the air, carried in a circular course by divine spirit.” Another angel replaces this divine spirit, he is not judged too closely on his geometry of the sky, and the Christian reader remains content.

Treatise IV: A discourse of Hermes to Tat: the mixing bowl or the monad

Hermes opens this treatise by returning to the craftsman, whom the *Timaeus* would call the Demiurge. Tat is the son of Hermes, so the father-son relationship is again given emphasis. Tat sounds like the nickname of a young child, his only identification in several treatises. Hermes begins in direct contradiction to Treatise II, “Since the craftsman made the whole cosmos by reasoned speech, not by hand, you should conceive of him as present, as always existing, as having made all things.... Because he is good, it was not for himself alone that he wished to make this offering and to adorn the earth; so he sent the man below, an adornment of the divine body, mortal life from life immortal.”

Hermes’ lesson now gets confusing, not unusual for him. The cosmos is ever-living and yet man can prevail over the cosmos. Does this make man immortal? Hermes does not say. Man lacks mind. Will attaining mind make man immortal? Hermes does not say. Not surprisingly, young Tat wants answers, and this leads Hermes to the extended metaphor of, “the great mixing bowl.” At least we assume this is metaphor. Otherwise we have a giant mixing bowl floating about the cosmos until young Tat can get his hands on it. Was Ficino, as

well educated as a European could be in the mid-Quattrocento, never troubled by these strange turns of speech? or did he gratefully let himself become Tat, content to sit back comfortably and closely listen?

Hermes' advice becomes more precise. The mixing bowl is divine. If the supplicant can cast off all bodily desires—"hate your body, my child"—he can attain the gift of the mixing bowl, the first explicit mystical statement, "in that it makes a human into a god." Presumably a welcome immortality will follow. The mixing bowl also encourages alchemists to believe Thrice-Great Hermes was on their side. Alchemy did seek divine elixir to prolong life, and Hermes gave a helping hand.

Treatise V: A Discourse of Hermes to Tat: his son that god is invisible and entirely visible.

Hermes talks of visible and invisible mirrors in his previous discussion on being and not-being. He argues by the mere force of the declarative sentence: these contrary factors of cosmic existence are true though with no attempt at metaphor or definition, simply because the great wise teacher says so. With this firmly in mind, Hermes sets up a royal divine structure, required for creating the cosmos, and keeping it in existence. Hermes strongly advises Tat to pray to these figures in order of their ranking. God the father is center of all, like the center of an ever evolving wheel with three spokes sticking out from him. In Hermes' metaphysics, emanating would be the better word. One figure is the sun, center of celestial light, which makes all light in the planetary system possible. Do note Hermes is not an early Copernican by placing the sun in all the planets' centers and yet the great Copernicus himself was so inspired by Hermes' laudatory praises of the sun to reconsider its position.

Copernicus is far from the only major Renaissance figure to engage Hermes Trismegistus. When Martin Luther, not a particularly wise man outside the realms of theology, adamantly condemned Copernicus' heliocentric cosmos, he was also forced to cast ridicule at Hermes. It does not essentially matter that Luther sharply disagrees with Lactantius that Hermes is a wise ancient distant prophet of Christ's coming, nor that Luther misreads the passages in Augustus that discuss the possibility of Hermes' prophetic powers. What matters is Luther, a major figure in all Christian history, is forced to take off his gloves and do battle with Thrice-Great Hermes. Luther's fierce attack gives strong added credibility to Hermes' historic position as a pre-Mosaic Egyptian semi-divine who was the first human ever to communicate directly with God, the language being hieroglyphics, and who therefore made this language sacred as well as his book-length text of utterances. If Luther was attempting to give Hermes a push towards popular readership and consequent belief, he could not have done better.

So the sun is the first divine extension of life that extends from the father, hub of the wheel. Hermes' lesson to Tat is just beginning. God could not create the cosmos without the craftsman, or Demiurge, and so this remarkable entity becomes the second spoke emitting out from God the father. The next spoke is the one, also monad, the number that contains all numbers and yet cannot be forcefully contained by any number larger than one. This smells of circular reasoning, but Pythagoras would have nodded in consent. Creation must begin with the one, and there is yet so much creating to do. If Tat is hearing all this for the very first time, he must be listening breathlessly.

Hermes makes a brief entrance into Pythagorean teaching by a simplistic analysis of the monad or the sacred number one. This number is of course the beginning of all numbers, and Hermes momentarily conceives a cosmos based on numbers. Let him talk, “Without a beginning there is nothing, and a beginning comes from nothing except itself if it is the beginning of other things.” This would appear an excellent example of circular reasoning, but Hermes has more, “Because it is a beginning, then, the monad contains every number, is contained by none, and generates every number without being generated by any other number.” The monad has suddenly, unexpectedly, become godlike, the ultimate divine craftsman, or perhaps the god who created the craftsman, who could not truly be moved. Pythagoras never left any writing behind him, but we would like to think he excelled in clarity in his mystical math, unlike this strange beguiling person of Thrice-Great Hermes.

Plato, perhaps inspired by this monad passage after his legendary pilgrimage to Egypt to learn math and philosophy, used a Pythagorean Demiurge in *Timaeus* to create a cosmos filled with mathematical hopes and possibilities. These creation sections might be the most dense and elusive that Plato ever wrote. Perhaps he was reading Hermes all too closely. Cicero, author of brilliant Latin prose and living three centuries after Plato, attempted to translate *Timaeus* from Greek to Latin and, to his chagrin and surprise, for he was a great admirer of Plato, surrendered his pen to another project; this author of the most clear, lucid Latin could not quite make sense of what was going on in *Timaeus*. Other scholars have thrown down their pens in helpless frustration, though none so famous.

Plato required his Demiurge to create the cosmos with three mathematical formulas: music, numbers, and geometry. The reader's problem is twofold—to understand each formula, always possible, and somehow avoid getting them all hopelessly entangled. The latter might be where Cicero had his problem. We do not know. He did not leave behind notes. Perhaps he tore his pages into shreds. But we shall do better. After all, we have had over two millennia to mull over the problems.

Why music? What help could music possibly be in creating the cosmos? Did Plato have in mind thundering, glorious background music that might enhance our pleasure at a motion picture of cosmic creation? Talented names like Max Steiner and Elmer Bernstein come to mind. But Plato, ever the Pythagorean in *Timaeus*, did not expect his cosmic music ever to be heard, at least not by humans wandering about on earth. What then? The *Timaeus* provides the finest description of a cherished metaphysical concept in the ancient world—the music of the spheres. Substitute planet for sphere and we can begin. Plato understood musical intervals, the separation between notes that make up a scale.

Recall Julie Andrews, not a Platonist, singing “Do Re Mi” in *The Sound of Music*. “The first three notes just happen to be, do re mi.” What Julie does not tell us is those three notes, which Pythagoras and Plato preferred to describe by number—one, two, three—contain the first two musical intervals, the spaces between 1 and 2 and between 2 and 3. This pattern persists till the difference between 7 and 8, when the pattern is completed. It might be useful to write out those numbers with dashes in between to stand for intervals. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8, The difference between 1 and 8, or do and do as Julie put it, is 7,

thereby forming a perfect octave, two notes forming the exact same sound but at different pitches, lows and highs. The sound is pleasing, as Pythagoras was legendarily the first to notice. Four internals take place between notes 1 and 5, forming a perfect fifth, also pleasant. Julie Andrews' song takes us up and down the scale several times, wonderfully entertaining, but rather an overkill for our project of understanding musical intervals and *Timaeus*.

Pythagoras, who could have accomplished his finest cosmic math by counting on his fingers, made the connection between seven planets—and seven musical intervals on a perfect scale. The planets had to be put perfectly in place, like the scale. Pythagoras then makes a gigantic leap for which he shall be forever famous: each planet plays a glorious note, like a divine musical scale. Hence the math of music is essential in the creation of cosmos. Plato's Demiurge accepted this startling notion, without ever looking back. It is essential that neither Demiurge nor any Platonist ever considered the possibility of ever hearing this magnificent heavenly music, and yet a great comfort existed just knowing it was ceaselessly up there.

If we are looking to connect ancient philosophy with Renaissance poetry, this would be the place. If sacred music could come from the planets, it could also come from the pen of a gifted or inspired poet. The music of the spheres indicated a grand artistic connection between delicately balanced and wisely balanced cosmic forces. Surely any poet could learn from this. If he had not yet pondered the eternal cosmic questions, it was time he started. Unlike the music of sun and moon, his verse would be heard, today and tomorrow, linking past and present like a newfound form of musical intervals. If he had not yet considered expanding the scope of his materials,

this was the time. Music soared in the heavens all about him. He only needed to take a deep breath, take in all that splendor, and settle down to work.

The math in the *Timaeus* is far less complicated, though near impossible to make coherent sense of. The matter of the cosmos, the basic stuff of all material objects, is held together by a basic system of even and odd numbers, another example of the opposites Pythagoras was so fond of.

Each even number is matched with an odd number. The monad is one and not matched, and surely Renaissance readers would assume Plato learned that from Hermes. 2 is opposite 3, 4 is opposite 9, 8 is opposite 27. That completes it. There is no more. Other patterns of doubles and squares could be worked out, but the overwhelming question stands out boldly: how could a complex, smoothly functioning cosmos function on just these six numbers? Why stop at 27? These numbers must hold some powerful, creative, mystical significance to Demiurge—not even Pythagoras went that far with them—but what? Would not many more numbers be required? Giordano Bruno would respond that an infinity of numbers was needed. That would seem far closer to a true answer than 27. Perhaps basic numerology was more sacred and powerful to Demiurge than any contemporary reader can comprehend. Does sublime energy come from the opposites being at war with each other? Is a divided androgyne—back to Hermes—part of this mystery? Or did Plato simply have so much to cover—creating our cosmos and getting it off its launching pad—that he could not provide his usual layers of philosophical depth to each factor. While the music of the spheres is ceaselessly inspiring, the numerical opposites land with a dull, light thud.

We now must look at how geometry entered Demiurge's creation of the cosmos. Plato was fascinated with the five—only five—regular solids in geometry. These are exact symmetrical figures that can be put together out of identical plane surfaces. With this geometry, we shall always be dealing with plane surfaces. The least complicated regular solid is the familiar cube—none of the others are remotely familiar—which is made of six squares, of course identical. Because the cube is so stable, the Demiurge chose to form earth with it. This means planet earth, which needs all the help it can get. The tetrahedron is a pyramid of four equilateral triangles. This curious form could never occur in nature without considerable help, and so Demiurge had to make it. Next question: what to do with it? Let it be the structure of fire.

So far, so good. Two of the four primary elements are already taken care of, and Demiurge still has three regular solids to go. Next in the Demiurge's prized list is the octahedron, composed of eight equilateral triangles. This is double the triangles in the tetrahedron, and we can be assured this holds a mystic significance, though Demiurge does not say. The octahedron forms the structure of air; we can assume this structure of eight equilateral triangles is too small for the human eye, though no one has ever said anything about Demiurge being human. He is surely one of a kind, but we will never define one-of-a-kind what.

We move now to the icosahedron, comprising twenty equilateral triangles and forming the structure of water. Again all these powerhouse triangles are below the level of the human eye. We have a geometric figure for all four elements, and yet one regular solid is left. The Demiurge is left to improvise, though he would never admit that, since he deals only with the

solid reality of matter in its varied structures. The last regular solid, not to be forgotten, is the dodecahedron, composed of an amazing twenty-two pentagons. Some ancient geometer had to do considerable thinking to come up with it. A practical use? The Demiurge uses this dodecahedron as the sub-structure for the entire cosmos. If by chance any part of the cosmos is not made of the four elements, the old reliable dodecahedron will step in and take over.

Was Plato unique in getting abundantly excited over these five regular solids? The history of science places well-deserved high honors on Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) for his three startlingly original, totally original laws of planetary motion. It might be worth noting that Thrice-Great Hermes and Plato never attained the slightest scientific accuracy in their wild and woolly cosmic speculations. But Kepler did. Yet as a young man, Kepler became fascinated with the five regular solids, turned Phyagorean, and made the only serious scientific mistake of his life. He placed each of the solids between a planet. He did not believe God could create five regular solids without divine purpose, and this planetary positioning was it. In his later years, Kepler debated vigorously with devoted occultist Robert Fludd. Apparently Kepler had forgotten his early imaginings, and we would do well to go along.

The five regular solids in *Timaeus*—those three with triangles—have a special gift of coming apart and joining, which means the three elements can change from one to another: fire can become air, can become water, can become fire, ad infinitum. This total flexibility of the elements would prove one more ancient text to excite and motivate Renaissance alchemists, and poets were often inspired by the various colorful, mystic strains of alchemical imagery. Hence, both

Hermes Trismegistus and Plato can lead to Renaissance alchemy. We have not struggled through these ancient texts entirely in vain. We have surpassed Cicero, we have not lost sight of the Renaissance, we keep waiting expectantly for that music of the spheres.

The third and final Hermetic spoke is the craftsman, an early version of the master builder, who can perform the actual creation when the all-too-spiritual God has sad lingering moments of not wanting to get his hands dirty. Apparently the matter of creation can be messy stuff. Obviously Plato applied these duo divine creators when writing of his Demiurge in *Timaeus*. The *Hermetica* and *Timaeus* can never inch too far apart because of the profound influence the former had on the latter, or so Ficino and succeeding generations thought. Hermes gives praise to the craftsman. “No one claims that a statue or a picture had been produced unless there is a sculptor or a painter. Has this craftwork been produced without a craftsman?” Hermes’ next words are not as simple. He stays with the declarative sentence, but adds the predicate nominative, “John is a man, Mary is a lady, Bozo is a clown.” Similarly in our texts, God is craftsman is father is God is craftsman. It can be abundantly confusing. Does it contain the spiritual truth that all these spokes and centers are equal? If not, what then? It remains difficult for the predicate nominative to produce elusive or deep cosmic truths when combined with the declarative sentence, and this Hermes has done, this time, several times, all too often.

In Hermes’ text, craftsman is creator, but soon he is a father and as father, perhaps wearing thick rubber gloves, is a creator. The father is a pantheist with far greater powers than title. His skills, no doubt miraculous, enable, if not explain, then

at least reveal the topic of this treatise, "That god is visible and entirely invisible." If that will not quickly set you off reading, then the mysticism might not be your subject. Hermes writes of father, "He is himself the things that are and those that are not. Those that are he has made visible; those that are not he holds within him. This is the God who is greater than any name; this is the God invisible and entirely visible." Hermes is telling Tat—remember him?—about a craftsman whose creative work is about a father. These are but declarative sentences, though of a high spiritual order. Ultimately Hermes should make a humble, reverent plea for faith, an all-embracing faith. But this motion fails to occur. Thrice-Great Hermes speaks for the father, for father as god. If Hermes has taken his dictation correctly, as Ficino and his legions of followers believed without question, the faith of all readers will be strongly taken for granted, a source of monumental uplift rather than doubt. Regardless of what mystical confusion pours from the mouth of Thrice-Great Hermes, he shall be believed.

The pronouns become more confusing the more the four members of the spoked wheel talk. Silence is seldom golden in the *Hermetica*. A sudden shift of person occurs after our last quotation, for God is unexpectedly the subject of the next sentence—where did he come from? Or was he with the father all the time? Past passages tell us he is the father, and yet so is the craftsman, who thereby becomes God. If the reader suspects an exaggeration of predicate nominatives and their accompanying meaning, do consider the final sentence of this fifth treatise, "The matter composed of the finest particles of air, but air is soul, soul is mind, and mind is God."

In the previous paragraph, Hermes has revealed the fulfilled and mighty power of God or the one, "When shall I

sing a hymn to you ... For what shall I sing the hymn. For you are whatever I am; you are whatever I make."

What this apparently means is all is an imperishable part of the great monad or one. "For you are whatever I am; you are whatever I make; you are whatever I say. You are everything, and there is nothing else; you are whatever I say. You are everything, and there is nothing else; what is not, you are as well. You are all that has come to be; you are what has not come to be; you are the mind who understands, the father who makes his craft work, the God who acts, and the good who makes all things."

Hermes has not learned these momentous, often contradictory divine facts from his own intense private meditation, though we can be assured this is an essential part of his life. Rather he has learned the words from the God whom he addresses his hymn to. The source of his music is the source of his information. Hermes enters the magic Cabalah of names in the third to last paragraph, when he again defines God, his ultimate father, "There is nothing that he is not, for he also is all that is, and this is why he has all names, because they are of one father, and this is why he has no name, because he is father of them all." The Cabalah practitioner would never dare to pronounce God's name, for he stood in frightened awe at its immense holiness. He works in Hebrew while Thoth speaks in hieroglyphics. Again these are the only two languages God has chosen to speak directly to man, and these languages—and only these—maintain a profound holiness. This might seem chauvinistic, and yet followers of Thoth and Cabalah would persist that no other tongue comes near them. Hence Hebrew's names for God hold the power, like Thoth's names, to suddenly appear and even more quickly vanish, to be all things to all

men, father, creator, sustainer, to make those predicate nominatives work tirelessly while human knees are painfully sore from the prayerful art of kneeling.

We have concluded all the basic theological content of Thesis V, and certainly young Tat has much to keep his head spinning. But chapter five in the treatise often gets overlooked, perhaps by its pleasant freedom from theological conundrums. This would be well and good if we were not sifting through the *Hermetica* for passages that were strongly likely to inspire poets. Paragraph five is a brief hymn to the poetic imagination, quite similar to the part of Chorus in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. It is similar to any Shakespeare play, notably *Antony and Cleopatra*, where the stirring action swiftly shifts from one scene to the other. Of course Shakespeare might never have read this hymn, but many future poets did, and it is unlikely that few got away without grasping its essential message. Let us once again hear Hermes speak to his son Tat:

Would that you could grow wings and fly up into the air, lifted between earth and heaven to see the solid earth, the fluid sea, the steaming rivers, the pliant air, the piercing fire, the coursing stars, and heaven speeding on its axis about the same points. Oh, this is a most happy sight to see, my child, to have a vision of all these in a single instant, to see the motionless set in motion and the invisible made visible through the things that it makes! this is the order of the cosmos, and this is the cosmos of order.

That final aphorism would not inspire scientists or poets, but the previous lines are a calling call of challenge to any would-be

poet, and a solid reason why Thrice-Great Hermes remained so indelibly popular.

Treatise VI: That the good is God alone and nowhere else.

Hermes speaks to Asclepius throughout this treatise. For the countless Renaissance readers who hopelessly misdated the *Hermetica*, this treatise shows the profound influence of Thrice-Great Hermes on Plato.

Plato constructed a philosophy around the concept of Forms—the capital letter is required. Neither perfect justice, nor the perfect circle or trapezoid, nor the perfect chair can ever be found on earth. What we witness on earth are imitations, often quite good imitations, often near exact, but imitations nonetheless. So where do we find the true authentic goodness or beauty or justice, not to mention the perfect triangle or circle, the perfect pillow or chair or sword? Plato provides an answer that has satisfied many, though not all. It might be safe to say the satisfied are the true Platonists, with Ficino carrying their banner through Renaissance times.

Plato proposes that perfections of all abstract nouns and common physical items do exist. Hence each noun or item has its own perfect Form. This requires careful, delicate explication. Since these Forms exist nowhere in man's experience, that being planet earth, where could we ever expect to find them? How about finding just one? That would at least get us off to a good start.

What Plato believes is another world does exist—call it cosmos, call it place of platitudes, place of Forms, whatever you like—and this world without a name, ideal and spiritual, is the home of all Forms, location forever unknown. Truly it must

exist or all the virtues and objects and, yes, animals could not exist on earth without it.

Each abstract noun or object or living creature has but one Form, all it requires. Without these Forms, no justice or triangles or cats could exist. That is the irrevocable rule—the weak imitation, countless of those, requires the one absolute perfect specimen—or Form.

Our own earth is permitted varying degrees of beauty and justice, and varying degrees of lovely women, or dogs, but only because the utter perfection of all these types exists eternally in their Forms, wherever that mystic, magic home of Forms happens to be. The translator from Plato's Greek could just as well call the Forms the perfect Ideas or Notions or whatever. The overall point, bewildering as it is, would be the same. If you contemplate it with one reading, you probably should be a philosopher.

Plato is not deliberately trying to obfuscate or confuse, though he does very well at those two. Ficino, in his copious writings on Plato, might have mentioned this dire problem, at least once, but the wise man from Florence came to consider Plato a fifth evangelist—or sixth, if Hermes held up well enough to be fifth—and evangelists seldom bear the brunt of any serious criticism.

Plato is concerned, to a momentous extent, with the difference between appearance and reality. What is truly real and what only looks to be real but in fact is not? This basic question has motivated many philosophers to ponder long into the night. Plato might have lost less sleep than most philosophers in working out his answer. The shoes you are wearing are but an appearance of the true, real, or ideal Form of shoes, located in Plato's never never land of Forms. His lack of

anything approaching a precise location would seem an indomitable failure of plan, but true-blue Platonists, none more so than Ficino, quietly overlook this.

You as defendant feel you are attaining justice in an earthly court of law, but this is but the appearance of justice, since the true quality can only exist in its Form. Your wife looks beautiful, but this is mere, weak, earthly beauty, not the eternal Form. You can expect to have the same problem if you produce beautiful-looking children.

Why so much attention on Forms? Forms are the cornerstone of Plato's long career in philosophy. It was a theme from which he spun many brilliant variations. The concept becomes far easier to accept the more one has dealt with it. The *Timaeus* is the rare dialogue that overlooks Forms. A student of Ficino is a student of Plato, and therefore the Forms had to enter our book somewhere—and why not here when clearly Thrice-Great Hermes set the concept of Forms in motion with his account of the good. Hermes makes one rather inane comment, “There is no night where it is a day and no day where it is night.” If a thick paperback would come out today called *Philosophy For Dummies*, this would head off the first chapter.

Hermes gets better, much better, though he still argues by the solitary force of the declarative sentence. Whatever Plato might have learned from him, it was not dialectic. Hermes starts telling Asclepius by direct statement, “Nothing is stronger than God.” Ficino must have enjoyed translating this. Hermes moves on to making obvious comments about some people being good, others evil. The two abstract nouns are in conflict, again not an original thought. What takes Hermes' treatise to a far, higher, transcendent level, one surely to have caught the eye of Plato during his famed pilgrimage to Egypt, is the human's failure to

achieve good on earth alone. This good, though mightily strived at, cannot endure, thereby becoming evil.

We have reached what is often called the pessimistic gnosis of the *Hermetica*. This goodness on earth is but an appearance, like an opinion, a false fact, not vital enough to survive. But Hermes swiftly provides the most hopeful of remedies, “The good is in God alone, then, or God himself is the good. Therefore, Asclepius, only the name of the good exists among mankind—never the fact. It cannot exist here.”

All this comes very close to Plato’s theory of Forms. Hermes primarily differs in finding a location for the good—“The good is in God”—but otherwise Plato could be said to be following him. This Hermetic influence of Plato, no doubt a great favorite of Ficino, will be taken up in the next treatise.

Treatise VII: That the greatest evil in mankind is ignorance concerning God.

The title of this treatise is yet another declarative statement by Hermes. Plato, speaking through Socrates, had often made similar remarks, though without inferring a deity. Socrates insists man only sins or performs evil actions because of ignorance over what he is doing. Remove the ignorance and you remove the sin—a bit naïve in our era of serial killers and mass terrorists bent on a cruel ideology, but both Plato and Ficino lived in simpler times, as assuredly did Thrice-Great Hermes. What these three thinkers hold in common is the term ignorance. Perhaps this time Hermes does say it best, “The vice of ignorance floods the whole earth and utterly destroys the soul shut up in the body, preventing it from anchoring in the havens of deliverance.

Treatise VIII: That none of the things that are is destroyed, and they are mistaken who say that changes are deaths and destruction.

Yes, we begin with a declarative sentence in the title, but much more complex than usual, with several abstract terms not easily defined. Hermes' statement seems heavily weighted with metaphysics, perhaps elusively so, until we recall the primary law of beginning chemistry, learned in our middle school classes: matter can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only be changed from one form to another. Hermes had no concept of chemistry—that also holds true for Plato and Ficino, perhaps Copernicus—but he might have held a variation of our middle school dictum in mind. Yet he strongly plays his metaphysical hand, “If the cosmos is a second god and an immortal living thing, it is impossible for any part of this immortal living thing to die. All things in the cosmos are parts of the cosmos....”

Hermes will conclude this vague statement by taking this treatise in an entirely new direction. “... but especially mankind, the living thing that reasons.” Hermes next changes his mind about creation, or perhaps we are failing to understand all those predicate nominatives about to hit us four-square. Suddenly the craftsman, so similar to Plato’s Demiurge, is not only gone but not needed. Hermes states, “God is in reality the first of all entities, eternal, unbegotten, craftsman of the whole of existence.” A modern scholar would of course pose the likelihood these several treatises came from more than one pen, a notion inconceivable to Ficino, who never ceased hearing the divine word of Poimandres (or God) while he translated.

The *Hermetica* received significant church approval throughout the Renaissance because Thrice-Great Hermes

seemed to predict a second god, a son of God, and thereby Jesus. This belief is a tremendous stretch, but the next sentence from Hermes shows reasons for the trust in prophecy, "But by his (God's) agency a second god came to be in his image, and by him this second god is sustained, nurtured and immortalized, as from an eternal father, ever-living because he is immortal." It would seem a long way from this statement to that stable in Bethlehem, but countless Renaissance Christians gladly took the pilgrimage. If the *Hermetica* had a sustained, subtle, below-the-radar influence on poets, it would be from attaching all the meaning possible onto a single passage and then sitting back comfortably to see what happened—and why not if the passage had its source in God? No one could doubt Hermes' strong influence on Plato when he wrote in the same treatise, "The matter that he invested with this spherical quality is immortal, and its materiality is eternal. Further the father implanted in the sphere the qualities of forms, shutting them up as in a cave." Plato's Allegory of the Cave, in Book Five of *The Republic*, will immediately come to mind.

Treatise IX: On Understanding and Sensation: That the beautiful and good are in God alone and nowhere else.

This is not the best organized of treatises, though the opening shows us on somewhat familiar ground. Hermes again speaks to Asclepius. To place the beautiful and good only in God is to make them Platonic Forms, for they are abstractions that can only exist in the most ideal and perfect states. The treatise tells us how humans merge understanding and sensations together, both invaluable. A person could not get along without each, and yet that hopeful individual is still a long

way off from the beautiful and good. Plato's notions of beauty are best found in *The Symposium*, his dialogue dealing with varying aspects of romantic love; we shall closely study this and Ficino's famous commentary in another chapter.

Christian prophecy again enters this treatise when Hermes states, "the cosmos is the son of God, and the things in the cosmos are made by the cosmos." In the previous paragraph Hermes has remarked, "There is nothing that is not a product of the cosmic fecundity. In moving, it makes all things live, and it is at once the location and craftsman of life." This is a cosmos without personality, yet a son, and with extraordinary powers. Replace cosmos with Logos, and we are back again to the start of John's Gospel.

The talents of God and cosmos, Father and son, overlap in this treatise. God has again been passed over as sole creator, left as almost a motif. But Hermes has a new, crucial point: God and man have vital factors in common, sensation and understanding. This is a transcendent level of macrocosm-microcosm, and Hermes is careful this vital concept is not overlooked, "God is not without sensation and understanding, though some would have it so, committing blasphemy in an excess of piety. For all things that exist are in God, Asclepius. They have come to be by God's agency, and they depend from on high, some of them acting through bodies, others moving through psychic substance, or making life through spirit as taking the spent remains, which is as it should be."

All is as it should be, for in the immanence of God, the humans get closer than ever before to the beautiful and good.

Treatise X: Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus: The Key.

This treatise contains repetitious material. It is long, very long, and Asclepius and Tat are the patient students. The sun is again praised. The vice of the soul is ignorance and, by contrast, the virtue of the soul is knowledge. The cosmos is the material, beautiful, but not good. A new influence of Plato is mentioned: all this required knowledge was known by the soul before birth, but entrance into this world causes a swift forgetting.

We linger on this treatise because of two memorable passages, which vividly convey the intense mystical experience of the human connection with deity. These are the passages that have inspired holy people and poets, and so many flaws and inconsistencies in logic can be forgiven because of them.

Hermes is discussing the divine vision of the good, represented by the sun, and the dazzling sun makes the awesome sight difficult to see. Tat, on the edge of his heels, asks his father, "Would that we, too, could see it, father."

We quote all of Hermes' wondrous reply:

Indeed, my child, would that we could. But we are still too weak now for this sight; we are not yet strong enough to open our mind's eyes and look on the incorruptible, incomprehensible beauty of that good. (We are again with Platonic Forms.) In the moment when you have nothing to say about it, you will see it, for the knowledge of it is divine silence and suppression of all the senses. One who had understood it can understand nothing else, nor can one who has looked on it look at anything else or hear of

anything else, nor can he move his body in any way. He stays still, all bodily senses and motions forgotten. Having illuminated all his mind, this beauty kindles his whole soul and by means of body draws it, upward, and beauty changes his whole person into essence. For when soul has looked on the beauty of the good, my child, it cannot be deified while in a human body.

Ficino, the ardent Platonist, would have treasured this passage. Language can never quite catch the human mystical experience, but this comes admirably close.

The treatise closes with the divine potential of humans, another passage to provide boundless hope and benignity.

For none of the heavenly gods will go down to earth, leaving behind the bounds of heaven, yet the human rises up to heaven and takes its measure and knows what is in its heights and its depths, and he understands all else exactly and—greater than all of this—he comes to be on high without leaving earth behind, so enormous is his range. Therefore, we must dare to say that the human on earth is a mortal god but that god in heaven is an immortal human. Through these two, then, cosmos and human, all things exist, but they all exist by action of the one.

Of course this splendid passage influenced Plato's conclusion to *The Symposium*, when Diotima takes the lover on a similar ascension process. Plato learned so much from Thrice-Great Hermes—if only they had lived in that order.

Treatise XI: Mind to Hermes

This treatise is long, quite long, and filled with material or philosophical techniques we have heard before. Mind is presumably Poimandres, so this piece holds a special sacredness since no intermediary exists between Ficino's translation. The predicate nominatives are brought into use, as these three sentences indicate, "All things come to be by the agency of God, then, and life is the union of mind and soul. Eternity, therefore, is an image of God; the cosmos is an image of eternity; and the sun is an image of the cosmos. The human is an age of the sun."

I defy anyone to explicate all that in twenty-five words or less, or maybe no other analysis is possible: all of immortal value is all of sacred value. Ficino might have liked that, but he would want me to contemplate a few years longer. But to believe the quoted words truly came from the mouth of God—Ficino would use the Capital G—would be a wondrously pious, mind-shattering experience. The reader could not help but fall to his knees between sentences.

Two consecutive paragraphs in this treatise, twenty and twenty-one by Copenhaver's superb translation, prove of special inspiration and practical advice to Renaissance poets, not to mention all past and future poets. So many passages in Shakespeare and Marlowe, and the travels of Milton's Satan and the overlapping worlds of Spenser's magic, are reminiscent of these two paragraphs. If you wish to write verse, believe you can accomplish anything with your language. Virgil takes Dante by the hand in these passages, while Coleridge reveals the haunting of his Ancient Mariner. For the fledgling poet, all can be expected to succeed because all can be expected to be tried.

If these passages of *Hermetica* did not inspire a poet, then his chances of inspiration from Ficino's efforts were slim indeed.

A scholar cannot read these passages without thinking again of the chorus in *Henry V*, the original mythology of William Blake, Shelley's climbings of mystic mountains, Marlowe's pursuit of magic flights of fancy that only exist in Mephistopheles' hand, sonnet cycles where the poet finds transcendent bliss in his beloved, and every love-at-first-sight scene in Shakespeare and Marlowe—Marlowe coined the term, but his admiring friend Shakespeare tipped his cap by using it—every Romeo first sighting Juliet will hold emotional risings in adherence to these passages. Finally Plato's Diotima learned from them by her careful and intuitive listening.

It becomes now our reader's turn for listening as we quote the entire first paragraph, with Poimandres speaking directly to Hermes, perhaps a poet in the making:

Consider this for yourself—command your soul to travel to India, and it will be there faster than your command. Command it to cross over to the ocean, and again it will quickly be there, not as having place to place but simply as being there. Command it even to fly up to heaven, and it will not lack wings. Nothing will hinder it, not the fire of the sun, nor the aether, nor the swirl nor the bodies of the other stars. Cutting through them all, it will fly to the utmost body. But if you wish to break through the universe itself and look upon the things outside (if, indeed, there is anything outside the cosmos), it is within your power.

This is extraordinary power—to learn of powers the deity himself is not sure about, or at least that subordinate part of the deity called mind. We cannot be certain. Poimandres has not given us enough information. We can be assured Thrice-Great Hermes wrote down—carved in stone—everything he said.

In the succeeding paragraph, Poimandres extends his supernatural display of power available to humans, or poets. But now the power will rise higher, approach and reach the full heights of mysticism where Hermes—and his countless readers—become equal to God. This would be blasphemy in another context, but Hermes does not seek the power of God but the goodness. To be truly good, Hermes must understand God, the only true good in creation, God's creation. Plato learned from this; Hermes' good sounds very much like the Platonic Form, and Plato would have liked all this reaching and striving, but Thrice-Great Hermes does truly reach the beautiful goal of likeness to God while his feet remained fastened to this earth, though likely to fly off wherever he wishes. Plato would have found this compelling reading, very compelling, but in the end turned it aside; perhaps his innate mistrust of poets for holding too much imaginative power would stand in his way. Plato would have liked Dryden and Pope, when they were not trying to say too much. He could never have trusted Dante or Blake, certainly not the soliloquys of Hamlet, and these are the visionaries who reached beyond all bounds, as suggested by Thrice-Great Hermes.

Explore the mystical heights that Mind reaches in the next paragraph:

See what power you have, what quickness! If
you can do these things, can God not do them?
So you must think of God in this way, as having

everything—the cosmos, himself, the universe—like thoughts within himself. Thus, unless you make yourself equal to God, you cannot understand God; this understood by like. Make yourself grow to immeasurable immensity, outleap all body, outstrip all time, become eternity and you will understand God. Having conceived that nothing is impossible to you, consider yourself immortal and able to understand everything, all art, all learning, the temper of every living thing. Go higher than every height and lower than every depth. Collect in yourself all the sensations of what has been made, of fire and water, dry and wet; be everywhere at once, on land, in the sea, in heaven; be not yet born, be in the womb, be young, old, dead, beyond death. And when you have understood all these at once—times, places, things, qualities, quantities—then you can understand God.

The obvious question arises, which Hermes does not ask—what happens to the human person who cannot accomplish all these things? Better question—what happens to the poor bloke who can accomplish none? That would appear to be most people. The answer is sad and obvious as the questions—very few people are mystics.

Plotinus, circa 270 AD, who worked his whole life at this sort of thing, claimed he only four times approached a mystical experience—understand he did not get there, probably not even close, but he did approach. Ficino translated Plotinus with extensive commentaries, so bringing him in is appropriate.

Plotinus was a devoted Platonist, struggling a lifetime to keep the great man's work alive and thriving. He is an earlier version Ficino, and this should be taken as high praise. Plotinus' biography—what very little we know of him—indicates the implausible scarcity of the mystical experience. A poet with great resources of language might imagine it—see John of the Cross, Blake, Theresa of Avila—or perhaps gain that richness with words by the rare experience, though this seems unlikely. Plotinus had two close, dedicated followers, also Platonists—Porphyry and Proclus—and neither took the first step towards transcendent mysticism, as described by Hermes. Both followers felt awe and marvel that their master Plotinus had entered the path four times; they might have required looking back to the pre-Christian ancient world for someone with this accomplishment. Of course not all mystics write down their divine experience, and a person who became momentarily equal to God might be afraid of telling people, lacking any idea what trouble this could get him into.

Yet, allowing for a modest collection of exalted mystics who lived and died unknown, we are still left with the awesome rarity of the experience, as recounted by Hermes. What remains astonishing to modern readers is those two paragraphs spoken by mind, presumably some aspect of God, did not cause a breakdown of belief in the *Hermetica*. Rather these passages were fully accepted—the deity had spoken—and a budding young poet seeking hope and inspiration could find no better place.

Modern commentators call these passages optimist gnosis. This sounds accurate, but aside from several brief mentions of evil, it is difficult to find clear instances of harsh pessimism in the *Hermetica*. Consider the basic doctrine, which

undergoes several repetitions: God used his unique traits of the beauty and good—again Plato’s Forms—to create all, sustain all, and live immanently in all. This is cheerful news. Even if you cannot snap your fingers and imagine yourself in India, you need never take a step without the certainty God is by your side.

Treatise XII: Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus on the mind shared in common, to Tat.

This is another long treatise—Tat might age visibly while listening—but his father does give one useful aphorism, “Do not let this terminology disturb you.” The terminology is again the philosophy of predicate nominatives and declarative sentences, held close to the heart by Ficino’s readers by what was intensely believed their ultimate source. Consider this typical advice Tat receives, “For if you carefully avoid contentious discourse, my child, you will find that mind, the soul of God, truly precedes over all, over fate and law and all else.” Shakespeare most likely did not have these lines in mind when he created Polonius, but similarities do exist.

Three passages are significant to Renaissance readers in this treatise, two paragraphs making alchemy possible and one succeeding paragraph about omens. They start at paragraph eighteen in Copenhaver’s translation. Never forget that alchemy from 1480 to 1660 was called the Hermetic art. These two passages help to explain why.

Hermes is again warning or assisting his son with vocabulary. Tat asks what seems a reasonable question, “The things that live in the cosmos, father, though they are parts of it, do they not die?” Hermes returns to our middle school axiom on chemistry, not without its uses in Quattrocento alchemy, “Hold

your tongue, child; the terminology of becoming leads you astray. They do not die, my child; as composite bodies they are only dissolved. Dissolution is not death but the dissolution of an alloy. They are dissolved not to be destroyed but to become new. And what is the energy of life? Is it not motion? In the cosmos, then, what is motionless? Northing, my child.”

The term alloy will certainly make an alchemist think about metals. Motion is the essential process of the alchemical practice, for the smoke moves ceaselessly through the alembic, a true microcosm of what Hermes teaches, with the alembic’s twin arms causing the smoke’s movement to be circular, moving over a carefully controlled fire, the central sun of Pythagorean cosmology and later of course Copernican. With either cosmology, the planets move in circles, as smoke through the arms of the alembics. Within these glass vessels, the lesser metals—lead, tin, copper—rest on kindling and/or charcoal above the fire, and the slow steady heat shall transmute them, lead to silver, copper to gold, lead to silver to gold. Patience is the greatest of virtues. A prayerful, humble intent is required to bring slowly about great richness.

Tat asks a good follow-up question, “Does the earth not seem motionless to you, father?”

Many members of the Flat Earth Society have asked that one, but lacked the wise expertise of Thrice-Great Hermes for response. But Hermes’ answer is more paradoxical than most children, and certainly all Flat Earthers, could handle: “No child; it is the only thing that is full of motion and also stationary. Would it not be quite absurd if the nurse of all were motionless, she who begets everything and gives life to it? (This of course includes those six metals growing and maturing in the ground, with the seventh metal, gold, having already reached

perfection.) For without motion the begetter cannot beget anything ... Therefore, my child, you should know that everywhere in the cosmos everything is moved, either by decrease or by increase. (We have another oblique reference to those metals growing in the ground; no alchemist would like to ponder how valued metals in the ground would decrease.) What is moved also lives, but not everything that lives need stay the same. (Again those metals.) Nothing, however, is corruptible or destroyed—terms that disturb human beings. (Back in that middle school science class.) Life is not birth but awareness (now come a steady stream of predicate nominatives to close this highly theoretical paragraph), and change is forgetting, not death. Since this is so, all are immortal—matter, life, spirit, soul, mind—of which every living thing is constituted.”

Every living thing includes those seven metals, and if even lead, the dullest metal, contains life, spirit, soul, and mind, then it should not take endless alchemical manipulating to transmute lead to silver, and with a few more twists of the hand, to gold. The divinely-inspired matter is just sitting there—or rather buried there—to be worked on. One might wonder why half of western Europe did not put down what they were doing to become alchemists. Why sail the frightening seas and do warfare to bring back New World gold when you could make it in your own backyard?

Paragraph twenty in the treaty makes reference to dreams and omens. Shakespeare might not have studied this brief passage, but his plays contain many varied omens. The streets and skies of ancient Rome are filled with omens in *Julius Caesar* in the harrowing hours leading up to Caesar’s assassination. Caesar’s wife is haunted by dreams, but he will not heed her caution. Hermes Trismegistus speaks with his

usual struggling clearness in telling his son about the basic nature of omens, "Through mind (never clearly defined in any treatise), then, every living thing is immortal, but most of all mankind, who is capable of receiving God and fit to keep company with him. (Since God is the source of omens, this sentence is necessary to set the groundwork. For some inexplicable reason, mind matters more than soul or life or liver or brain or what-not in dealing with omens.) With this living thing alone does God converse, at night through dreams and by omens by day, and through all of them he foretells the future, through birds, through entrails, through inspiration, through the oak tree (this a new one), wherefore mankind also professes to know what has been, what is at hand and what will be."

Hermes does not mention astrology, but this passage would give comfort to a superstitious stargazer—if I can predict the future by an oak tree, why not by a conjunction of Saturn and Mars.

Hermes concludes this treatise to his son with four strong declarative sentences, heard before and regarded by modern interpreters as optimist gnosis. This might be a resounding point if it were not so very difficult in all these pages to find the pessimistic. Hermes speaks, "For God is all. And the all permeates everything and surrounds everything. Show this discourse reverence, my son, and keep it religiously. There is but one religion of God, and that is not to be evil."

Treatise XIII: A secret dialogue of Hermes Trismegistus on the mountain to his son Tat: On being born again, and in the promise to be silent.

The treatises stay long and the titles get longer. Tat must do a lot of listening. Hermes lists twelve negative forms of suffering a negligent human can commonly undergo. This occurs in paragraph twenty-six. In the next paragraph, Hermes provides the solutions in the same order, though only ten solutions are required. The power of goodness can be efficient.

We shall give but three examples so our reader can perceive Hermes' method. Lust is the fourth problem, surely not an easy trial for a young man (or boy) like Tat, still learning to feel his way around. Hermes, as his habit, employs the solution of a simple declarative sentence, "Now in the fourth place I summon perseverance, the power opposed to lust." This would leave modern sex educators feeling they had little to work on, but of course they have not conferred with God. Hermes warns Tat, "the sixth greed; the seventh deceit." A good reading of *Piers Plowman* would be far more helpful, though Ficino, not a medievalist, might have assumed William Langland could only have improved by reading Hermes.

Now for Hermes' swifter than the speed of light solutions, "The sixth power that I summon to us is the one opposed to greed—liberality. And when greed has been departed, I summon another, truth, who puts deceit to flight." Easy as that. "And truth arrives. See how the good has been fulfilled, my child, when the truth arrives." I do not think even Ficino could consider these vague abstract nouns to be great inspirational forces for the Platonic Forms. Plato could have written the *Republic* without reading this. Shakespeare could

have written *Hamlet*, though it is again possible to have Polonius in mind.

When Tat overcomes his twelve vices, he utters a line that is reminiscent of a mystical William Blake, "Since God has made me tranquil, father, I no longer picture things with the sight of my eyes but with the mental energy that comes through the powers." His father learns to keep all he has learned secret. Tat obeys. Tat will always obey. Since he has rather painlessly got rid of twelve nasty vices, he would not want to go around looking for another one.

Treatise XIV: From Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius, health of mind.

Like Tat, Asclepius must be a very good listener, because Thrice-Great Hermes is not creating new theology or cosmology in this treatise. Life forms are begotten, and ultimately a life form had to exist that was unbegotten and older than all begotten entities. This would be the Hermetic God. Even Ficino might hesitate before calling this a precursor of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover.

Treatise XVI: Definitions of Asclepius to King Ammon on God, matter, vice, fate, the sun, intellectual essence, divine essence, mankind, the arrangement of the plenitude, the seven stars, and mankind according to the image.

Do note we have not lost our ability to count in pouring though this divine wilderness of knowledge. We have moved from treatise fourteen to sixteen. Ficino scholars have always known that the complete set of treatises numbered eighteen, but

one was missing. Copenhaver, as his textual apparatus shows, has excellent reasons for all his decisions, and he selects number fifteen as missing. Hence our text, forever grateful to Copenhaver, is missing the Roman numeral XV. We are still good Pythagoreans. We can continue.

(This missing Hermetic treatise, by whatever number, became the subject of an Elizabethan thriller, titled *Heresy*, by S. J. Parris, with Giordano Bruno risking life and limb to find that treatise in 1582 London. Parris expertly depicts the violent conflict between Catholic and Protestant, and thereby raises her work to true literary seriousness.)

So now we come, at last, to Treatise XVI with the off-putting title. King Ammon, not a household name, remains unidentified. But he will hear the final burst of Hermetic glory. Also, the two treatises that follow are weak, repetitious, and can be briefly described. Meanwhile, Asclepius, in Treatise XVI, with his awkwardly, cumbersome title would seemingly require several small pamphlets to cover adequately all that material. He would indeed if his title represented all he meant to talk about but not so. His topic is the sun.

But first he talks about the greatness of the Egyptian language, which of course he speaks. Greek, by contrast, is, “an inane foolosophy of speeches,” a nice rendering on Copenhaver’s part. Egyptians, however, “use not speeches but sounds that are full of action.” This brief linguistic exercise has told us nothing, or next to nothing—what exactly are sounds full of action? A speech with only strong verbs? Strong verbs that shall always be chanted? Loudly? Is this same vague concept the music of the spheres? If neither Ficino nor Copenhaver could figure it out, it is most unlikely we shall.

Asclepius' action speech opens paragraph three with a wild goose chase of predicate nominatives. He refers to Hermes as his teacher, and he has learned well. "I shall open the discourse by invoking God, the master, maker, father and container of the whole universe, the all who is one and the one who is all." We are yet again dealing with metaphysics by declarative sentence. "For the plenitude of all things is one and is in one, not because the one duplicates itself but because both are one."

This short section would most likely remind Ficino of the opening of John's Gospel, if only because of the huge creative power given to one who seems to shy away from one name. John's opening is no less easier to paraphrase than this Asclepian passage. Reason? Neither requires the slightest touch of proof. Both adamantly state—what I say is so, is so because and only because I say so. Try that on for an off-putting paraphrase. Yet the content, sadly, is accurate. The New Testament only has one Doubting Thomas and he only doubts for one scene. The major factor Ficino holds in common with John is faith, vivid all-encompassing, transcendent faith. Again consider those two sentences by Asclepius and John's opening. Only faith would allow a reasonably thinking person—and Ficino surely is this—to find those passages credible. When cruel, cold logic battles faith, logic shall always lose in the eyes of the stalwart unquestioning believer. Asclepius and John do not question; they relate. The latter has astonishing verbal gifts; the former is able to put one word in front of the other.

Asclepius used that rugged wordsmithing—his sounds, full of action—to write an extended hymn to the sun. He needs to define his terms. God again requires a craftsman's work, and he seldom finds a more powerful one than this Asclepian sun.

Newton could have learned—if the Hermetic stretched his theories of gravitational pull—and surely Timaeus with his Demiurge. Asclepius gets started, “The craftsman—I mean the sun—binds heaven to earth, sending essence below and sending matter above, attracting everything toward the sun and around it, offering everything from himself to everything, as he gives freely of the ungrudging light. For it is the sun whence good energies reach not only through sky and air but even to earth and down to the nethermost deep and abyss.” This awesome power can prove most helpful to the alchemist, who likes thinking of buried lead and copper receiving the sun’s reviving rays.

So how does this magnificent sun work? The question is not well-founded. However, Asclepius answers with a rare, precious moment of honesty, “Only the sun knows … of what this (the sun’s intellectual essence as well as its light) is composed or whence it flows since by location and nature it is near to the sun … we who are forced to understand by guesswork, do not observe it. But a vision of the sun is not a matter of guesswork.” And there we have it—an Hermetic teacher admitting he does not know something, or rather, despite his regular talks with God, something cannot be known.

Next comes the most important statement in the entire Hermetic corpus, “For the sun is situated in the center of the cosmos, wearing it like a crown.” The great Copernicus read those words and took note. He mentioned *Hermetica* in the opening pages of his great astronomical work. The rest is history.

Alchemists also noticed what Asclepius stated about the all-powerful sun, for instance, “with the light held in confinement as it shines all around inside the hollow of water

and earth and air, the sun enlivens and awakens, with becoming and change, the things that live in these regions of the cosmos.” That certainly would include underground metals, but Asclepius has more to say about the alchemical process itself.

We continue from his last sentence on the sun. “It brings transmutation and transformation among them, as in a spiral, when change turns one thing to another, from kind to kind, from form to form, crafting them just as it does the great bodies.” The alchemist now has his macrocosmic effect, much needed. We continue, “For the permanence of every body is change: in a mortal body (minerals) there is dissolution. And this is what distinguishes immortal from mortal, mortal from immortal.”

This Treatise XVI might be the most coherent and well-organized. Meanwhile at least until the last two paragraphs, the sun is all and all the treatise is the sun. Thus alchemists have their handbook. Copernicus has an inspiration lurking at the back of his head.

Astrology enters the final two paragraphs. A rigid structure of authority is suddenly imposed, with humans not in a particularly good situation. These paragraphs would influence later Neo-Platonism, if the dating were truly done Ficino’s way, with the emphasis on hierarchic cosmic structure. Let Asclepius tell us in the penultimate paragraph, “Around the sun are the eight spheres that depend from it: the sphere of the fixed stars, the six of the planets, and the one that surrounds the earth. From these spheres depend the demons, and then, from the demons, humans. And thus all things and all persons are dependent from God.”

This last sentence is hopeful, for Asclepius means the father-god, the ultimate power, the only power over the craftsman—sun. The last paragraph closes with yet another new

restatement of John's opening, which should forever protect us from demons, as well as Quattrocento inquisitors staring over Ficino's shoulder. "But if all things are parts of God, then all things are God, and he makes himself in making all things. His making can never cease because he is ceaseless. And as God has no end, so his making has neither beginning nor end."

Treatise XVII: Unnamed

One idea is of value in this short treatise, which reads like a fragment. Tat talks with a nameless king. His big idea starts with a question, "doesn't it seem to you, for example, that there are forms that appear in body even though they are incorporeally in the bodies not only of souled beings but of the soulless also?"

Tat is venturing into the magical area, forbidden by church authorities, of incorporating life into statues. When we finish discussing the *Hermetica*, we will move right on to *Asclepius*, the other great magical treatise of the Renaissance, and again translated into clear, smooth, readable English by the esteemed linguist, Copenhaver. The cornerstone of magic in the *Asclepius* will be god-making, the ancient Egyptian power of drawing spirits, demons, and souls into purely physical statues.

D. P. Walker places high emphasis on god-making statues in his brilliant book on Renaissance magic, *Spiritual & Demonic Magic, from Ficino to Campanella*, Vol. 22, Studies of the Warburg Institute, University of London, 1958. In 2000, Walker's book was brought back into print by the Pennsylvania State University Press, with not surprisingly, Copenhaver writing the Introduction. It is essential reading on these many, complex matters. Walker states, as a theme of his work, the

Renaissance felt no greater reverence or belief in an ancient passage than the Egyptian god-making instructions. The Renaissance magus, in our brief exposition of Tat, is moving at personal peril into deep dangerous waters.

“You have put it well, Tat,” comments his unnamed listener.

Tat then expounds a full paragraph of the magical capacity of vivifying lifeless statues made of purely physical objects. This will be picked up at the close of the next treatise, with all that needs quoted from that one, and we are set to sail straight forward into *Asclepius*, a much shorter work than *Hermetica*, but equally valued by practicing magicians, alchemists, and poets for 150 years.

Let Tat answer his companion, “Thus, there are reflections of the incorporeals in corporeals and of corporeals in incorporeals—from the sensible to the intelligible cosmos, that is, and from the intelligible to the sensible. Therefore, my king (Ammon?), adore the statues, because they, too, possess forms from the intelligible cosmos.”

This is not writing of the utmost clarity, but hold onto it till *Asclepius*. Tat paves the way.

Treatise XVIII: On the body hindered by the soul’s affections.

The speaker is probably still Tat, who has grown up fast, but we cannot be certain. Tat notes, “our father’s limitless power and limitless extent.” But we have heard this before, several times. The structure of *Hermetica* is often like the repetitive refrain from a song, and the passages of sustained praise no doubt were meant to be sung.

Tat concludes *Hermitica* with a strong comment on the supernal power of the king's statue. He does not specify how it got that way, "Even statues of the kings are havens of peace for the tempest-tost; the sight alone of a king's image has brought much victory and, if it stands unthreatened and undamaged, has protected those who stand by it."

What strikes modern readers as remarkably curious is how easily the ancients, whether in late pharaohs' Egypt or early Christian history, had no difficulty believing all this, and then believing so much more in *Asclepius*, where we now turn our attention.

ASCLEPIUS

Asclepius did not make a sudden surprise entrance into western European culture like *Hermetica*. *Asclepius* had been circulating around since the closing centuries, as precise a statement as we can make about this, of the Roman Empire. A Latin translation was believed to belong to Apuleius of Madura, also author of the wickedly funny and ever popular satirical novel *The Golden Asse*. Modern linguistic scholars specializing in ancient Rome feel troubled giving accreditation to Apuleius, though his authenticity did hold sway throughout the middle ages and Renaissance, when, unlike today, the work was widely read and re-read.

Widely read is not the same as immense popularity, and this *Asclepius* received, by whatever translator or team of translators, in the mid Quattrocento and a century onward. What had changed? *Asclepius* was believed to be authored entirely by Hermes Trismegistus, with Asclepius the primary student, questioner, listener. The wide geographic range of boundless

excitement over Ficino's *Hermetica* would strongly rub off on *Asclepius*, since both works drank copiously from the sacred eternal font of ancient Egyptian wisdom. If Ficino's work was abundantly accurate and true, as so many trusted, then the same must be felt for *Asclepius*. The latter's extended title could only increase the rapidly burgeoning confidence in its long-sustained message. Hence the title *Asclepius: To me this Asclepius is like the sun, A Holy Book of Hermes Trismegistus addressed to Asclepius*. If Copernicus read this title page, he surely would have wanted to read further. Nearly everyone did.

Plato obviously learned from how the opening section was organized. Often in his dialogues, Plato has characters come and go, until he has gathered the exact group of Athenian intellectuals he wants. Hence Plato's dialogues can be confusing at the start, and the reader requires careful, slow reading until he has all the permanent figures permanently in place. The author of *Asclepius* employs the same stagecraft; Asclepius is there from the first, Thrice-Great Hermes philosophizes, then Tat enters. You cannot tell the players without a score card. After Tat's sudden entrance, Asclepius strongly suggests to Hermes that Hammon—not to be confused with Ammon—should join. When Hammon enters the sanctuary, the four seem stable and settled, but not for sure. Of course Plato was born long before *Asclepius*, but if you have your priorities reversed, you can easily see how Plato was so influenced by these sudden stage entrances that he went to considerable trouble to imitate them. Of course Plato came first and he had other reasons for his complications—the ring of verisimilitude, a slow starter who truly did move his pieces around a while before he started—but the mid to late Quattrocento felt both Thrice-Great Hermes and Plato were far above the petty annoyances of criticism. These two towering figures had become evangelists from deep

antiquity, and so there should be frequent coincidences how often John the Divine has been mentioned.

Asclepius is one long treatise with no dividing points. Renaissance readers believed Hermes got his words straight from God—a fact never felt about Plato, no matter how brilliant—and so literary criticism was seldom applied. Most of Hermes' content has already been revealed in the *Hermetica*; this strongly reinforced the passionate beliefs of readers in both works. Of course their content should be very similar—was not Hermes taking dictation from the same God about the same vital human and cosmic matters? The term carbon copy was not known to Ficino's age, but it applies.

One repeated fact is the existence of forms, weakly defined but surely headed towards the more extensive definition of Plato. We cannot paraphrase Hermes on forms—and so we had best quote:

All things that depend from above, however, are divided into forms in the way that I am about to explain. Forms of all things follow kinds, so that the kind is the entirety while the form is a smaller part of the kind. Thus, the kind made up of gods will produce from itself the forms of gods. The kind made up of demons, as that of humans and likewise birds and all things that the world contains breeds forms resembling itself.

It would be a long way to Lamarck and Darwin, but the Renaissance found this truthful, inspired, fascinating. They put on their critical blinders and held them firmly in place—after all, Hermes Trismegistus got his words from the deity and so no chance existed he could be wrong. For many, no chance existed Hermes could have gotten a word out of place.

Hermes will talk more of forms, with his poetic flights of fancy getting in the way of solid content. This passage, immediately following the quote, could just possibly refer to metals growing in the earth and thereby be another source of the Hermetic art.

Thee is another kind of living thing, a kind without soul yet not lacking senses; it thus finds joy in good treatment, harm and weakness in adversity. I am speaking of all those things that come to life in the earth when their roots and stems are undamaged; their forms have been scattered all over the earth.

True, a reader might desperately want alchemy in that passage to find it there, but we are talking about a Renaissance reader deeply immersed in alchemy. Considering its divine source, he would not have let this passage pass by. Similarly, a devoted Platonist would not have overlooked the previous passage without an assured confidence that here was a divine source for their hero's theory of Forms. We are not dealing with a twenty-first century mind, grounded in the rules of basic historic scholarship, but with a Renaissance mind who still considered Livy and Suetonius the models of historical process. The concept of dating historic texts or questioning historical sources was all too new to them, and their main source of truth was not scientific experiment but the Bible. We should never stray too far from these factors when fully analyzing ancient texts—hence Yahweh spoke to Moses, and Poimandres, in about the same time frame, spoke to Thoth or Thrice-Great Hermes. So, of course, *Asclepius* will repeat significant matters in *Hermetica*, for it is unlikely the deity would change his mind about the eternal verities.

Asclepius relates how, “a human being is a great wonder, a living thing to be worshipped and honored; for he changes his nature into a God’s, as if he were a God.” It is difficult to see how the church could have read this without sending out attacking armies of the inquisition. But Hermes does slightly redeem himself by Poimandres’ creating a second god, “next after himself,” “a progeny of his own divinity.” Hermes places his Christian readers on a temporary emotional see-saw. The reader can become, “like a god,” and he will have no difficulty worshipping Poimandres’ son or second god. Hermetic writing is nothing if not confusing. Important terms are not clearly identified, or receive multiple definitions, and thereby risk slipping through our hands; no better description could be given of the prose style of many alchemical pamphlets, dating from 1540 to 1640. The all-wise Hermes had made his mark.

Hermes’ comments on the humans as, “a great wonder” might find solid influence in Pico’s *Oration on Man*. Pico seems to be talking like Hermes when he elevates man to the highest place in the universe because man and only man can choose hierarchic spiritual levels by his own free will. Shakespeare will make many uses of this concept, some quite subtle; Hamlet turns Pico to verse when he talks of the wonders of man in an extended soliloquy. This concept will reach many curious primary texts and flimsy pamphlets before reaching Shakespeare’s London, but the source is Florence.

The see-saw will continue till the famous god-making passages, for which cultural historians shall always remember *Asclepius*, passages which were read avidly throughout both the middle ages and the Renaissance, when careful readers found them not only wildly heretical, but appalling, fearful, all-too-

powerful for common folk to get their hands on, or so the church vigorously commanded. The church's ill-thought response made the god-making passages all the more popular, or widely studied, by scholars, maguses, common folk in ever growing numbers, for literacy was spreading, accompanied by ever popular heresies.

Let us stay on the see-saw a little longer. Hermes states the basics, "The master of eternity is the first God, the world is second, mankind is third." Apparently the second created god proceeded to create the world and thereby, in some rare mystical sense, became the world. This is at best educated guesswork, often required in *Asclepius*. What is certain is no Christian Trinitarian could ever accept this, and protesting pastors would howl from their pulpits in utter dismay. The century following Ficino would not be known for religious compromise.

Hermes ventures into ideas better associated with traditional Buddhism, though his chances of venturing off to ancient India are slim. Like a Buddhist, Hermes blames many human problems, including vice, on the frantic desire for possession. Possession is defined, "Any earthly possessions owned out of bodily desire are all alien to every part of his divine kinship." Yes, Hermes has defined a Cheshire cat as being of the species cat, but he is a mystic sage not a philosopher. Yet humanity remains divine, so this craving for possession is particularly abominable or soul-threatening. A Buddhist with a soul offers a powerful spiritual entity. Both Buddha and Hermes will warn, you engage in enough foolish craving and you shall suffer. Hermes would add that the human soul could fall several notches on the hierarchic scale. That scale, or call it Jacob's ladder or Diotima's ascension process in

Plato's *Symposium*, is another metaphor used in a living way throughout Shakespeare, though without giving the source. This lack of Shakespeare's sources should not trouble us, for a dramatist will seldom interrupt the action for prop men with cue cards revealing possible sources, to race in front of actors and thereby slow down the play to a standstill.

But Hermes has yet to utter his key statement on possessions, "Everything of this kind, then, is alien to mankind, even the body, and we should despise both the things we yearn for and the source within us of the vice of yearning—and yet, because the heavy and excessive vice of body slows him down, he cannot rightly discern the true causes of their nature." What this poor befuddled greed-crazed loon cannot discern is anything of true value. He has lost the good fight because he keeps fighting the bad one.

The church might not flinch too badly at this Buddhist intrusion, but the afterlife of the loon will set Christian alarm bells gonging. Hermes quite unabashedly believes in transmigration—and maybe he did venture off to India when life was proving a little dull in Egypt. According to Hermes, human souls who were good Buddhists on earth, upon death, no great tragedy, next "of loosing the bonds of mortality so that god may restore us, pure and holy, to the nature of our highest part, to the divine." The greed-crazed loon sadly fares differently. But unlike Christian doctrine, he is not damned eternally, but given a second chance, in another body. Presumably that body can be beast or man, and if he lives well in this next life, death will find him moving up the cosmic ladder to the divine and perhaps getting there.

But Hermes can change his mood, tone, or even content suddenly, almost breathlessly, without warning or time to gasp.

Hermes leads to the Cabalist inspiration of reverence for God's name, though he has provided no special name for God while the Cabalist has provided many. Hermes writes, "then the whole of god's name also includes meaning and spirit and air and everything at once that is in them or thought them or through them." The church waits with bated breath till Hermes' next shocking comment, "God, the only and the all, completely full of the fertility of both sexes and ever pregnant with his own will, always begets whatever he wishes to procreate. His will is all goodness." This could be Yahweh except for that intrusive gender confusion, and Asclepius, always alert and attentive, asks the big frightening question that was assured to make churchmen in high places tremble, "Do you say that God is of both sexes, Trismegistus?"

Hermes will now leave his Buddhist chariot crashing in the dust. The Vatican could not be more displeased by his extended answer, "Not only God, Asclepius, but all things ensouled and soulless, for it is impossible for any of the things that are not to be infertile." Do note this does not leave much. Also note an alchemical reader would likely include those five base metals growing ever so slowly beneath ground. He would grab sacred evidence wherever he could find it, and Hermes was merely repeating what God told him. Androgyny was a major alchemical symbol of two metals uniting, and the diligent worker in the lab had found a blessed source. If he could not turn that d___ lead into gold, the problem must be his sad lack of spiritual purity or intensity. God had spoken. There could be no mistake about that.

Hermes of course has much more to say in his sudden revolt from Buddhism, "Take away fertility from all the things that now exist, and it will be impossible for them to be forever

... that the world contains growth within it and preserves all that have come to be." Recall this world is the second god, the creator god—not too much inconsistency here. Immediately the chaste thoughts often associated with Buddhism is directly attacked, "For each set is full of fecundity, and the linking of the two or, their union, is incomprehensible." Copulation? Incomprehensible? Apparently the wonder is so great, or godlike, that it can only be defined by mystery. "If you call it Cupid or Venus or both, you will be correct." God, this master of the whole of nature, is to be steadfastly thanked for, "this mystery of procreation unto eternity, in which arose the greatest affection, pleasing gaiety, desire and love divine." No devout Buddhist in lotus position ever talked like that. If Plato read this carefully, he might have placed echoes in his *Symposium*, though it would be difficult to know which speaker.

Besides all its glorious wonders, Hermes tells us carnal love is a mystery. Could he explain his bold mystery? He attempts in many words that praise the sexual act above all others. Shakespeare might like that, also Marlowe, but Hermes, with nice diction, confuses carnal with divine. After so many words, his argument is ultimately by declarative sentence; the sexual act lending to procreation is a great sanctified mystery because I say so. But let Hermes use his own words for a short while:

One should explain how great is the force and compulsion of the mystery, were it not that each individual already knows from contemplation and inward consciousness ... finally at that moment from the common coupling females gain the potency of males and males are exhausted with the lethargy of females. Therefore, the act

of this mystery, so sweet and so vital, is done in secret so that the divinity that arises in both natures from the sexual coupling ...

The secrecy is required so neither partner will feel shame by an audience, no matter how small. Again an alchemist could interpret this passage as his own, for he commonly worked in secret, and kept his notes in secret code, all the more frustrating for scholars of later years to attempt decipherment.

We now come to the famous (or infamous, as you will) god-making passages. Recall the last two treatises of the *Hermetica* made brief elusive references to this strange supernal act. Its theme of resurrection is often used by alchemists, especially in their cryptic art that depicts a kinglike figure, often in loincloth, rising from a plain rectangular tomb. Dead metals have become live metals; base metals have become precious metals; lead has become silver; copper has become gold. Shakespeare might never have read the god-making passages, or memorized them for frequent use, but his later romance plays frequently have characters coming back from the dead—*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *All's Well*—and he displays his own god-making passage, or a close version, in the bewildering close of *A Winter's Tale*.

Hermes at first talks about the supernal power of statues without yet offering an explanation how they get that way. “But the figures of gods that humans form have been formed of both natures—from the divine, which is purer and more divine by far, and from the material which they are built, whose nature falls short of the human ... humanity persists in imitating divinity, representing gods in semblance of its own features, just as the father and master made his gods eternal to resemble him.”

Now Asclepius asks what is not his brightest question, “Are you talking about statues, Trismegistus?”

Hermes, a little abashed, strongly replies, “Statues, Asclepius, yes. See how little trust you have!” That remark might be meant for all of us. He proceeds, “I mean statues ensouled and conscious, filled with spirit and doing great deeds; statues that foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams and by many other means; statues that make people ill and cure them, bringing them pain and pleasure as each deserves.”

Obviously we would like to know how these wondrous statues get made and set in motion. But first Thrice-Great Hermes inserts a long passage, the longest passage in the entire text, that foretells a savage apocalypse of dust and fire that shall temporarily destroy Egypt. Suffering will be widespread, “Fire causes many alterations that are divine”—another fact friendly to the alchemist. Hermes turns philosopher, discusses the void, and adamantly decides there can be no such thing. We are left knowing much more about what the void is not than what it ever possibly could be. As the long apocalypse ends as suddenly as it started and Egypt moves swiftly to recover, Hermes makes an important remark, also cherished by alchemists “It comes from a mixture of plants, stones, and spices, Asclepius, that have in them a natural power of divinity.”

Alchemists might glibly pass over this without a second thought, but Asclepius and we should follow closely, as Hermes is caught in the terse thicket, where words are vague, elusive, hard to define, of his god-making talks about their Egyptian ancestors—how far back or before the apocalypse, he does not say—and how they, “once erred gravely on the theory of

divinity.” No clear explanation is ever given, but the error must be grave and serious. Yet the error is sudden and the solution also sudden, also vague. We can only go by what Hermes tells us, though realizing we are on essential sacred ground. Hermes continues without pause, “(our ancestors) were unbelieving and inattentive to worship and reverence for God.” The solution comes as fast as the disaster, with as little information, as Hermes utters the most famous words in his entire treatise, “But then they discovered the art of making gods.” Somehow the Egyptians could not actually make gods, and yet the wonder of the statement holds.

What Hermes appears to be saying—and we can never be quite sure—is Egyptians cannot create souls or gods or angels or demons or hobgoblins or pucks *ex nihilo*. Apparently only Poimandres, Egyptian for Yahweh, can do that. But multitudes of gods, or supernal creatures, apparently all nameless and minor—Zeus or Apollo, won’t be brought into this concoction—do exist in nearby cosmic realms, and these rather aimless, brainless gods can be induced to live inside well-made Egyptian statues and provide all the marvelous supernal powers such statues possessed in our previous passage.

This account, or something very like it, must be happening, and yet Hermes declines clarity. After his famous, highly-overrated statement, he bravely plunges on, perhaps not quite sure where he is heading. It is a certainty poor Asclepius has no notion. States Hermes, “To their discovery they added a conformable power arising from the nature of matter. Because they could not make souls, they mixed this power in and called up the souls of demons or angels and implanted them in likenesses through holy and divine mysteries, “... we are never

far from mysteries ... “whence the idols could have power to do good or evil.”

This ends the great god-making passage, surely a misnomer if we have ever encountered one. D. P. Walker, brilliant scholar-writer, evaluated the sincerity of a magus’ beliefs on how strongly they cohered to this jumble of explication. No specific prayers or hymns are given, though the gods do like this, always comforting to know. If making magical statues were this easy, they would outnumber the population of ancient Egypt or Renaissance Europe. No man ever need feel lonely again. Just make a statue with an angel inside.

Why study this? Because most scholarly minds in Europe’s Renaissance poured over these odd, little, cryptic passages even if only to reject them, and because D. P. Walker knew more of the magic of this era than any modern thinker. Most importantly, because of many connections, often strong, often frail and tangential, can be made with Shakespeare, throughout his canon, but especially the late romances, where the great dramatist overcomes plot explications as weak as Hermes with sustained magnificence of language, unprecedented in the romance forms, and with characters as widely-varied and lifelike as early Jacobean theatre would come to see.

Chapter Four:

Ficino and Plato's *Symposium*

Ficino's brilliant handling of Plato's *Symposium* shows to fullest advantage his multiple gifts which were to influence strongly fifteen decades of Renaissance poetry on romantic love, most notably sonnet cycles, as well as prose treatises on the philosophy of love, a popular genre now sadly only read by scholars. Ficino brings these powerful forces together by translating the *Symposium*, thereby making it available to western European readers for the first time since antiquity, and providing a stirring, illuminating commentary. This was the great man's method. He would do the same with Plato's *Phaedrus*, also about the bewildering complexities of love's powers, and again profoundly influence Renaissance writers of verse and prose. Ficino and *Phaedrus* shall be the subject of our next chapter. With all respect to *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium* held by far the greater influence, becoming the most significant work of literature on romantic love in the Renaissance.

This author's previous volume with Edwin Mellen Press shows how this influence moved steadily forward for a century till meeting up with Giordano Bruno in London, 1582-1585.

Bruno found that place and time congenial to compose *Heroic Enthusiasms*, mixing together in a totally original way a sonnet cycle and love treatises. He became close friends with Sir Philip Sidney, author of the first great sonnet cycle in English. John Donne would be influenced, though the greatest English follower of Ficino-Bruno in his sonnets was William Shakespeare. My previous Edwin Mellen volume, titled *Renaissance Magic and Hermeticism in the Shakespeare Sonnets*, published in 1995, gives a detailed study of the history of this profound influence, Ficino to Bruno to Shakespeare, but only with regard to the latter's masterful sonnets. This volume will connect the Ficino influence, with some essential reference to Bruno, to the plays and narrative poems of Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. In a sense, this will be a completion of my earlier project.

Romantic love might not be Marlowe's specialty, though he does have fine exquisite moments, but no poet wrote more varied, wondrous, and glorious passages about romantic love than Shakespeare, whether Juliet leaning over her balcony, Cleopatra foolishly leaning over her kingdom, or all those confused young lovers in that confused world outside Athens. This is not the chapter for the many Neo-Platonic influences on Shakespeare, but rather his bounding interest at lovers quickly coming together, often at first sight, and pledging eternal troths. Marlowe wrote the famous line in *Hero and Leander* about how only true love comes at first sight. Ficino's addition of the *Symposium* filled the Renaissance with numerous aspects of this all-abiding belief system. Elizabethans need not memorize the *Symposium* to be aware of its basic content, for this was in the air they breathed and hence people were not actively conscious just how strongly they were inhaling. A close look at the

numerous Elizabethan sonnet cycles, requiring a census taker as much as critic, provides exemplary proof.

Likewise Shakespeare need not have studied Ficino, Bruno, or Plato, though Bruno made a huge lasting impact during his three year visit to London, 1582-1585. But Shakespeare could have learned the essential content of these three major figures by closely reading his fellow sonneteers, by books loaned him by his scholarly friend Ben Jonson (a bit of a stretcher but not impossible), by witnessing young people and, yes, middle-aged people in love and connecting those observations with his copious reading which likely included Renaissance love treatises, in prose, that once highly popular genre. Of course we shall never discover the favorite texts of Shakespeare's vast reservoir of knowledge and imagery on romantic love, but he shared so much with his age, an age he so spectacularly transcended, and he would include the philosophic air his age breathed—love is virtue, love is good, love is beautiful—and thereby transforms his English tongue into sustained passages of love, holding unprecedented power, originality, transformation, beauty, and so we must do what we can to understand the bedrock source of these passages—and this leads straight back to Plato's Athens and Ficino's Florence.

Plato's *Symposium* has a simple structure. Several friends with a strong philosophical bent, all male of course, though a woman's voice will make this dialogue's major contribution, meet for an evening banquet. Because they have imbibed seriously yesterday, they agree not to do so tonight. The keeping of this pledge will become quite meaningful as the dialogue closes. The guests are interested in various aspects of love—particularly romantic or erotic love. A decision is made. Each guest will make a philosophical speech on love—rhetoric

was their great beloved art—and at the close of the evening, basic truths of love should hopefully result from the combined experience. Plato indicates many speeches are given, but he only reproduces five, word for word, including a drunken interruption after speech five by young Alcibiades, who rambles into what might be considered a sixth speech, though he talks more of the wondrous personage of Socrates than abstractions of love. Perhaps this leads his intoxicated wandering to be the truest speech in the purely human sense, though it is unlikely many readers would have thought so.

Ficino's commentary closely follows Plato in structure and content. This was not always Ficino's way, but perhaps he this time found Plato's structural clarity irresistible, or perhaps Ficino had a little bit of the closet playwright in him. Ficino's commentary is also a banquet, held in honor of Plato's birthday, November 7. Ficino opens by remarking that Plato's birthday has not been honored in such a grand or reverent way in twelve centuries. Ficino might be correct about that, though we have no record of what Plotinus and Porphyry were doing on November 7. Ficino's plan is to commence his banquet with a close, careful reading of the *Symposium*. Obviously this is a strong nudge the reader is to do the same.

Then Ficino explains his strategy; among his guests, five shall be chosen by lots to respond to each of the five speeches in Plato. The choosing by lots works surprisingly well, since Ficino's speakers have solid areas of knowledge in common with Plato's. For example, Plato's Eryximachus is a physician and his speech shall be responded to by Ficino himself, also a physician. This pattern works quite well until Alcibiades' drunken outburst at the close of Plato; Ficino talks of a matching speech but does not produce one, and so the semi-

coherent pastiche of Alcibiades is left to stand alone, probably wisely so, for Ficino, always the gentleman, would have to pour a half gallon of strong wine down someone's throat to compete. Nevertheless it might have been most interesting to see what Ficino came up with.

We use the great Jowett translation in quoting Plato. Phaedrus is Plato's first speaker—the same Phaedrus of the dialogue on love that bears his name—and his firm forthright approach is literary. Love is a god, "a mighty god, and wonderful among gods and men, but especially wonderful in his birth. For he is the eldest of the gods, which is an honor to him." Phaedrus quotes from Hesiod to affirm this, and notes Acusilaus agrees. So he is on solid ground to state the lover would feel a greater disgrace in being witnessed in a cowardly act by his beloved than by his father, companions, anyone else—the hold of romantic love, not always heterosexual, is truly that powerful. An army of lovers and beloveds would be unstoppable. Alcestis, bravest of women, sacrificed her life for her husband and therefore was permitted to return alive to earth. This story parallels several return-from-death scenes in Shakespeare's romances, though surely he could have other sources. Achilles sacrifices his life to revenge his male warrior lover Patroclus, and thereby the gods honored him even above Alcestis, by sending him to the Isles of the Blest. Phaedrus has introduced myth, religion, and the supernal to love. Its praise is high, though the praise by other speakers shall be higher.

Ficino's chosen speaker to respond is Giovanni Calvacanti, the major Italian poet of love. The drawing by lots had again produced a worthy choice. Calvacanti is a literary man, and he follows a literary explication. But Calvacanti, in no more lengthy a speech, reaches far more transcendent heights,

echoing the creation in *Timarus* and reminding his fellow Christians of opening Genesis. He is fulfilling Ficino's goal of blending Platonism and Christianity, with no rough edges showing. He begins, "In the beginning, God created the substructure of the Angelic Mind, which we also call Essence. For God, who is omnipotent, created in the Angelic Mind, as it cleaved to Him, the forms of all things to be created.... In those forms were conceived the globes of heaven and the elements, the stars, the kinds of vapors, the forms of stones, metals, plants, and animals." Hence an anthropomorphic God has provided the Platonic Forms. An alchemist would be pleased to read this, through he would like more detail.

Now Love enters this vast cosmic picture. The Forms are also called Ideas and Prototypes, the latter a more modern term of a contemporary translator (Sears Jayne, University of Missouri Studies, 1944). However, before these can attain any recognizable shape, they are, "that still formless substance which we mean by Chaos." Calvacanti next expounds how Love transforms all this Chaos into cosmos, or orderliness. Chaos wanders aimlessly about until:

that first turning towards God we call the birth of Love; the infusion of the divine light, the nourishing of Love; the ensuing conflagration, the encrement of love; the approach of God, the impact of love; and the giving of forms, the completion of love.

The poet Calvacanti is not finished with the wonders of love, for he must specify the forms which great love has created, "And so we may say that the nature of Love is this, that it attracts to beauty and links the unbeautiful with the beautiful."

He repeats how love's creative powers immediately followed Chaos.

At Calvacanti's opening—we of course mean Ficino's opening—we might have assumed the Angelic Mind would be similar to Plato's Demiurge. Calvacanti intends this, but with subtle, elusive language, "since the passion of the Angelic Mind preceded its own acquisition of the form, and in that Mind, once it had taken form, were born the gods of the world." Calvacanti is not a technical writer, for no one holding that title could attain so much content from so few words. He agrees with Phaedrus in calling Love the oldest of the gods, citing Orpheus as his source. This should not be surprising, since Ficino felt strong spiritual connections to Orpheus throughout his adult years and often sang orphic hymns while accompanying himself on a stringed instrument.

Calvacanti expands and develops his structure of creation, for it must occur three times. The opening step is the same: God nudges or propels the Angelic Mind into action. Hence the Angelic Mind has been given being out of Chaos and this concludes creation one. Calvacanti's clarity of language is not effective, not uncommon for a Platonist, but his essential points do get across. The Angelic Mind accomplishes two creations out of chaos—the World Soul and the world or earth, where humans customarily live. That World Soul is the all-important transition, the spiritual connecting link between Angelic Mind, and thereby God, and Human.

Calvacanti also praises the sun in high metaphysical terms. As humans look toward the sun, so the Angelic Mind looks towards God. Such basic comparisons are common in Ficino and Plato. Humans require the sun to see all things, a statement similar to a stanza in Shakespeare's Sonnet 20:

An eye more bright than these, less false on
rolling,

Gliding the objects whereupon it gazeth;

A man in hue, all hue in his controlling,

Which steals men's eyes, and women's souls
amazeth.

Throughout the Renaissance, a common occult symbol was a large single eye, wide-open, hanging high up in the sky and shining, rather like the sun.

Plato's second speaker is Pausanias, a philosopher of love, to be followed in our account by Ficino's Aglis, a theologian. Pausanias starts with myth, and uses it to develop a plausible and meaningful idealism of love. Two Aphrodites exist. This is new to listeners of our first speakers. Aphrodite One is the daughter of Uranus, a mighty god up there on Olympus. This Aphrodite is by far the older of the two. Pausanias is not making the claim she is the oldest of gods, but perhaps close. What matters is Aphrodite One has no mother—this is a far better trick than the persistent Christian belief in the virgin birth—and Pausanias, with no effort at explanation, declares her lack of a mother makes her the goddess of heavenly or spiritual love, by far the most superior of loves. Translated to the human realm, the lover who follows Aphrodite One will be attracted to his beloved for her soul or virtue.

The story is not so pleasant for Aphrodite Two. Up there on Olympus she had parents of both genders, Zeus and Dione, and that makes her the goddess of physical love. Pausanias shows far more depth here than might be expected. Yes, the lover who craves a woman because of her body is serving Aphrodite Two, and not in a very good way. But the lover also

serves her if he seeks a mate for wealth or social position. He might well get all these things, but he is still likely to feel a lingering emptiness inside, that can only be filled by serving the other Aphrodite. Yet even this service, the seeking of a beloved who can teach virtue and knowledge, especially knowledge of the good, can fail to bring happiness, though always honor. How so? In all honesty and sincerity, the lover might have chosen wrong, mistaking a money-crazed fiend for a lady of inner beauty, or less extreme, the beloved who only talks of virtue but cannot practice it. The pursuer will eventually know when, not if, to cut his losses, head held high with self-respect and dignity, and be better prepared for his next encounter with a potential Aphrodite One.

Ficino's drawing by lots chooses the theologian Agli for commentary. Agli starts by repeating what seems the same information about the two Aphrodites. But for Agli, Uranus is the Supreme God who surpasses all spirits. This leads Aphrodite One to the towering position of Angelic Mind, "completely foreign to any relationship with corporeal matter." This is not a goddess of earthly romantic love, not on any level, but who, "by innate love is stimulated to know the beauty of God." This beauty can only be transferred to humans by Aphrodite Two, again the daughter of Zeus and Dione. She is, "the power of generation with which the World-Soul is endowed." Clear writing is not Agli's strong point, but we must push on with him, for he will eventually make strong Platonic statements.

Aphrodite One must transfer divine power, love, to her subordinate Aphrodite, so she can make the transfer to humans. This is Agli's supernal cosmic structure, a concept never conceived by Pausanias. "The former Venus first embraces the

Glory of God in herself, and then translates it to the second Venus. This latter Venus translates sparks of that divine glory into earthly matter.” The humans are urged to procreate, a strong theme in Genesis and the first fourteen Shakespeare sonnets, but again not mentioned in Pausanias. “But the power of generation in us, which is the second Venus, desires to create another form like this.” This obviously means begetting children, a semi-divine act, and Agli has concluded his first section.

Agli strikes out into new territory with metaphysical statements on love and death, function and existence. His comments on romantic love, and only romantic love, now become most intriguing, meaningful, and far-fetched. Agli’s thesis is the two lovers exist only in each other. This is reciprocal love, a staple of today’s greeting cards, and the desired end.

Let him talk:

He who loves dies; for his consciousness, oblivious of himself, is devoted exclusively to the loved one, and a man who is not conscious of himself is certainly not conscious in himself ... The soul that does not function in itself does not exist in itself, for function and existence are equivalent. There can be no existence without function, and function cannot survive existence itself; a thing cannot function when it does not exist, and whenever it does exist, it functions.

No greeting card ever talked like that, for all that verbiage is making a simple, if powerful point, the overwhelming completeness of romantic love, both when it works and when it does not. Many poems in many sonnet cycles come out of that

statement. If reciprocal love, Agli's term, were swift, easy, and common, we might not have so many poems.

But all goes well in the enchanted world of the reciprocals. It remains in Agli's other term, simple love, or unrequited love, that huge, truly life-or-death problems ensue. "In this case the lover is completely dead." Yes, this starts off like a country 'n western song, but Agli takes it ever so much further. If the man loves, he cannot live in himself, "as we have already sufficiently proved, nor does he live in his loved one, since he is rejected by him." Agli is analyzing homo-erotic love but his cumbersome thesis could apply to either gender attractions, "Where then does he live? In air, water, fire, earth, or in some animal carcass? In none of these, for the human soul does not live in any but a human body ... for if it does not live in that in which it most fiercely desires to live, how can it live in any other? Therefore, the unrequited lover lives nowhere; he is completely dead; moreover, he never comes back to life unless indignation revives him."

Agli does not elaborate on indignation, and so this death seems final. He is not talking of suicide, not at all, but rather a sad, slow, quiet, withering away of the soul. Agli will later charge the disdaining lover with homicide, and building up steam, attacks with charges of theft, homicide, and desecration. The theologian has moved to the law courts. By law, Agli's law, a person receiving the flattering attention of love must return it. No compromise is considered or allowed. A most extreme metaphysics of clinging romantic love has been drawn out and completed.

A comic touch is now added to the *Symposium*. Aristophanes, the comic dramatist is scheduled to be the next or third speaker, but he has a rough case of the hiccoughs. So he

asks Eryximachus, the physician, to take his place and for professional advice in ridding hiccoughs. Eryximachus does both. He applies his medical knowledge to an explication of love, and this results in his polite urging to keep all aspects of life in harmony. He is a quiet Pythagorean. Eryximachus believes in two kinds of love, the healthy and diseased, and these exist not only in man but, "in the bodies of all animals and in productions of the earth."

Eryximachus will concentrate on man and his proud role as physician. "For medicine may be regarded generally as the knowledge of the loves and desires of the body, and how to satisfy them or not; and the best physician is he who is able to separate fair love from foul, or to convert one into the other, and he who knows how to eradicate and how to implant love, whichever is required, and can reconcile the most hostile elements in the constitution and make them loving friends, is a skillful practitioner." His next sentence is vital to his overall thesis, "Now the most hostile are the most opposite, such as hot and cold, bitter and sweet, moist and dry, and the like."

With this emphasis on opposites, he has delved into the bedrock of Pythagoras' thought. What Pythagoras sought was harmony of all those opposites, and so does Eryximachus. Health and thereby success in love were to be derived by the reconciliation of opposites. Eryximachus, who does not stay on a subject very long, applies this concept to music in the most general way. Discord results from notes of high or low pitch, and welcome harmony comes from the reconciliation of these pitches. "Hoar frost and hail," can be destructive to farming, as Eryximachus again makes his point that extremes are damaging. But love can be the source of all reconciliations, the true harmony of the spheres and bringing forth the good,

temperance, justice. The potentially successful lover has been sent confidently on his way.

Ficino speaks as Ficino in his response. He, like Eryximachus, is a physician, though so much more. The drawing by lots has again served well. Ficino repeats previous material; ironically, his brief section is little more, “to indulge in tireless repetition.” We hear again of cosmic structure: God, Angelic Mind, World-Soul. Ficino does place new emphasis on the human sense of sight. Since the human soul is so burdened by the earthly body, the purely physical sight, coupled with the vast powers of the sun, apparently part of the World-Soul, allows bedraggled humans to feel a wondrous appreciation of creation. “Therefore, one light of the sun, painted with the colors and shapes of everything illuminated by it, presents itself to the eyes ... Wherefore, the whole order of the visible world is presented to view, not in the way in which it is infused in the matter of bodies, but the way in which it is infused in the light streaming into the eyes.” That quatrain already quoted from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 20 would again be applicable.

Aristophanes has at last overcome his bout of hiccoughs, and can now give Plato’s fourth speech. Our comic playwright will not fail to amuse, as he presents his own creation myth about both human and gender formation. Humans originally occurred in three perfectly round shapes that moved about by rolling. Each shape contained two solidly combined genders: male-male, female-female, and male-female. This trio of rolling humans became too self-confident and uppity for the mighty gods on Olympus, and Zeus became angry and determined to cut each figure in two and require them to walk on two legs.

If human behavior still did not improve, Zeus would slice them in half again and require each poor confused figure to

walk on one leg; this latter did not happen, as we can tell by looking around us, but the original division did occur—and the result was a sudden outpouring of romantic love between the two divided halves. Each would frantically miss his separated half. Hence two-thirds of these potential lovers would be homoerotic, since the separated man-man would seek to come back together again, as would the woman-woman. Aristophanes' audience at the banquet might have found this comical, though modern readers with vastly different tastes are not likely to. The one potential heterosexual romance will be between the man-woman, an androgyne that separates and seeks coming back together—more possible humor that is lost in modern readers. Aristophanes makes a few closing remarks of rather contrived piety, but it is doubtful this comic artist has fooled anyone.

The response to Aristophanes is perhaps even more comic, and allows Ficino to speak through the poet Landino. In Ficino's entire canon, this might be the one comic passage which he composed himself, and so we would do well to look at it closely. Landino begins with more terms, which the preparation of the living body requires: Arrangement, Proportion, and Adornment. Let Landino briefly define, "Arrangement means the arrangement of its parts, Proportion means their quantity, and Adornment means its shape and color." Landino has not yet told us much. Like many readers, he needs to develop his ideas.

As it happens, he only develops Proportion of parts and that is all he needs to. We quote in full because nothing this enjoyably funny or wickedly satirical can be found in Ficino:

A Proportion of parts, to give to each part,
keeping the proper proportions of the whole
body, its mean size, so that three noses placed

end to end will equal the length of one face, and the semi-circles of both ears joined together will equal the circle of the open mouth; the joining of the eyebrows will also give the same result; the length of the nose will match the length of the lips, and so also will that of the ears; the two circles of the eyes will equal one opening of the mouth; eight heads will compose the length of the body; the same distance will also be measured by the spread of the arms, to the side, and likewise of the legs and feet.

Landino concludes, perhaps by obligation, by praise for the, “vital and spiritual charm first infused in the Angelic Mind by the illuminating light of God, thence in the souls of men, the shapes of bodies, and sounds.” Of course we have heard this before. The repetition will inevitably happen as the succession of speakers progress.

Agathon is next for Plato. We need note this banquet is held in Agathon’s honor, for the day before he won an important dramatic contest in Athens, performing before thousands. Now he performs before little more than a handful, but a very special handful, and he might find this more challenging. If Agathon had been the final speaker, as he perhaps hoped, this banquet would have been a second triumph for him. However, sitting quietly by was Socrates, the ultimate voice of Plato, and he will, with ever so many false hesitations, slow stops and starts, follow Agathon, whose eloquence will soon pale into nothingness as Socrates’ oration finally mounts steam and gets full underway.

Agathon shows himself a master of purple prose. He begins by contradicting both Phaedrus and Pausanias. Love is

not the oldest god, as they contend, but the youngest. Hesiod, his opponents' source, was not speaking of love but necessity. This remark does not send Phaedrus and Pausanias hopping out of their chairs in disagreement, perhaps because they do not consider the time-old pedigree all that important or, more likely, because they do not want to stand unprotected against the sheer unrelieved power of Agathon's rhetoric, which will soon be coming.

Agathon speaks as if he grabs one huge intake of air, and then speaks for all he is worth until the air runs out. He rapidly praises love as the source of the most worthy Platonic virtues: temperance, courage, justice. "And at the touch of him everyone becomes a poet."

Let Agathon talk about love, verse, creativity; he becomes a poet, "even though he has no music in him." This quote can also be found in Euripides, as Agathon the actor would know. "This also is a proof that love is a good poet and accomplished in all the fine arts ... who will deny that the creation of the animals is his doing? Are they not all the works of his wisdom, born and begotten of him? And as to the artists, do we not know that he only of them whom love inspires has the light of fame? ... the arts of medicine and archery and divination were discovered by Apollo, under the guidance of love and desire; so that he (Apollo) too is a disciple of love ... Love set in order the empire of the gods ... the love of beauty."

Ultimately, Agathon cannot be paraphrased. He can only be quoted. His Love is truly all-powerful, all-comprehending, all-creative, and yet this sentence tells us little without Agathon's exalted litany of Love's manifold accomplishments. Like the composer of a great symphony, Agathon finishes with a coda, a flourish of wondrous abstract nouns: Love is, "parent

of delicacy, luxury, desire, fondness, softness, grace ... in every word, work, wish, fear ... savior, pilot, comrade, helper; glory of gods and men, leader of best and brightest: in whose footsteps let every man follow, sweetly singing in his honor and joining in that sweet strain with which love charms the souls of gods and men."

Agathon has at last concluded, to "a general cheer." No doubt he would have taken home the honors for the second straight day, if only Socrates was not waiting in the wings.

We have quoted extensively from Agathon because the possibility exists that Plato was composing parody of excessive rhetoric. Agathon does get carried away with himself. He is grand showman, not philosopher, and this might be the problem Plato has with him. The critic can only decide by a close reading of Agathon's speech, and determine if the dominant resulting emotion is the embrace of fervent agreement or the inner chuckle of delighted amusement.

Carlo Marsuppini is Ficino's speaker meant to match Agathon. There is no contest. However the critic regards Agathon, his oration is a masterpiece of prose compared to the short, stuttering offering of Marsuppini. He compares the attraction of love to the magnetic power a lodestone confers upon a stone. Love is also compared to a fish on a hook. It is unlikely Marsuppini is the originator of these images. He declares a lover wants complete possession of his love object, not a mere part. He does well to close quickly by mentioning Diotima, the only woman ever to speak in a Platonic work. She will dominate Socrates' speech and Ficino's response.

Let us move now to Socrates, who ever so slowly picks up the ball with Agathon ever so sadly watching. Socrates does not commence by a towering oration but by his usual simple

method of asking questions. He becomes a teacher, in Plato's hands one of the greatest, and his famous method allows his friends—Socrates would have preferred this word to students—to seek the knowledge within themselves, what later generations would call gnosis. This time Socrates' questions are brief, direct, straightforward, but he does ascertain from his listeners that love desires the good and beautiful. These appear equivalent terms, a slow subtle beginning for what is to follow.

Socrates next introduces Diotima, that only woman speaker in Plato. Ironically, next to Socrates and Timaeus, Diotima might be Plato's most important speaker, for she is Socrates' instructress in love. Recognizing his own ignorance in love, a vital part of the Socratic method, Socrates has gone to Diotima to learn. Socrates can remember word-for-word what Diotima has told him. Such impressive memory is not rare in Platonic characters. That the complete *Symposium* exists is a feat of extraordinary memory by two characters; Aristodemus has recited the entire work to Apollodorus, who now in turn recites it all to an unnamed companion as well as Plato's readers, meaning us. If we grant these two men are gifted actors knowing several parts, their feats of memory might not sound so impossible

Socrates is always an actor, or performer, and he could not be so influential, especially in this instance, without vast powers of memory, for what Diotima tells him will become the first great love treatise of the Renaissance, and her words might be the most inspiring Plato wrote for that long era. Plato's theories on government and cosmology can seem sadly outdated to modern readers, though these readers lack a sharp sense of historical acuity. But Diotima is always fresh and new. She inspired the Shakespeare sonnets, many love passages in the

great poet's plays, countless love treatises, including Ficino's which we currently study, and after Ficino's translation of Diotima, all major sonnet cycles in French, English, Italian.

Diotima speaks through Socrates. When he talks, she talks, and soon the reader is listening only to this wise woman of Mantinea. Diotima is a Pythagorean in that she seeks happy, reasonable mediums between extremes. She is not a sage afraid to be happy. Wisdom and ignorance can be extremes in the human soul, warns Diotima, with the mean being right opinion. Love is the mean or intermediate between divine and mortal. Hence both God and humans can partake of it. Love can bring together humans and humans as well as humans and God. Love, "is the mediator who spans the chasm which divides them, and therefore in him all is bound together, and through him the arts of the prophets and the priest, their sacrifices and mysteries and charms, and all prophecy and incantation find their way. For God mingles not with man; but through Love all the intercourse and converse of God with man, whether awake or asleep, is carried on. Now these spirits or intermediate powers are many and diverse, and one of them is love." If we are reading Diotima correctly, the two main other powers are the good and the beautiful.

Diotima creates her own myth for the birth of love, and does not enter the banquet's previous competition as to whether love is old or new. Two gods, perhaps minor, surely not famous, named Plentitude the male and Poverty the female copulated one time in the garden of Zeus—overtones to Genesis are vague but not non-existent—and the resulting child is love, who takes on qualities of both parents and thereby becomes an intermediate god. Love, "is by nature neither mortal nor immortal, but alive and flourishing at one moment when he is in

plenty, and dead at another moment, and again alive by reason of his father's nature ... and further he is in a mean between ignorance and knowledge."

Next comes an original definition of Love and Philosophy, though not disconnected from what has come before. "For wisdom is a most beautiful thing, and Love is of the beautiful; and therefore Love is also a philosopher or lover of wisdom, and being a lover of wisdom is in a mean between the wise and the ignorant. And of this too his birth is the cause; for the father is wealthy and wise, and his mother poor and foolish." Setting aside the obvious harsh sexism of Diotima's last statement, the Greeks of Plato's time apparently could not talk about gods, like Love or the good, without incorporating them, sooner or later, in a myth. If Diotima cannot pull the myth she requires out of Hesiod, she creates her own. For her, philosophy can only be a creative process, and this might explain how so many Renaissance writers, authors of sonnets and love treatises, two new genres that would explode across the sixteenth century in popularity, would be indelibly drawn to her.

These authors, often young and brimming with excitement, would often be drawn to her because she has so much of vital originality on subjects of eternal interest to say. After all, Socrates never tired listening to her.

Diotima next examines Love more deeply. She herself enters the Socratic method, an irony perhaps not lost on the banquet audience. She asks quietly probing questions. What is Love? Socrates' turn to answer "Love is of the beautiful." Her question, "when a man loves the beautiful, what does he desire?" Socrates' answer, "that the beautiful might be his." We might assume Socrates is talking about a woman, or a beautiful

young man, but Diotima will not let us jump to conclusions. That is neither her method nor Socrates. More questions clarify that good can be put in place of beautiful—her syllogism is building—and possessing the good is the only certain road to human happiness. Aristotle required several hundred pages to tell us this. Diotima has the wondrous gift of brevity.

Diotima wisely narrows her definition of Love and provides a warning, “For you may say generally that all desire of good and happiness is only the great and subtle power of love; but they who are drawn towards him by any other path, whether the path of money-making it or gymnastics or philosophy, are not called lovers—the name of the whole is appropriated to those whose affection takes one form only—they alone are said to love, is to be lovers.” Later Diotima states, “For there is nothing which men love but the good.”

Diotima has set up strict restrictions, and we might analyze them a moment. Why her critique of gymnastics? Perhaps because the gymnast obsessed with exercising will also be obsessed with his appearance. In reaching the highest, transcendent levels of Love, this would not work. Why such a harsh statement on philosophy, especially to Socrates? Perhaps Diotima refers to the hair-splitting, yet somehow overly practical rhetoric of the Sophists, and Socrates understood that. Anyhow Socrates did not object, and he was never shy of doing that.

Diotima next moves on for the essential need for humans to procreate, especially humans blessed with strong aspects of intellect and beauty. She is not sympathetic to human deformity, her one statement that loses admiration. She speaks of procreation as requiring the harmonious beauty of the child, and deformity disallows that. She has allowed her deep

commitment to theory to cast aside basic compassion. Similarly, her comments about human childbirth depict the powers of love, beauty, and harmony, though she is overly idealistic in denying a woman's pain and travail in giving birth. In short, Diotima insists the beautiful of either gender should procreate, love requires this, and Shakespeare uses this theme throughout his first fourteen sonnets, all addressed to a young man of extraordinary beauty. Diotima states, "When the hour of conception arrives, and the teeming nature is full, there is such a flutter and ecstasy whose approach is the alleviation of the pain of travail—because generation is a sort of eternity and immortality—and if, as has been already admitted, love is the everlasting possession of the good, all men will necessarily desire immortality with good; wherefore love is of immortality."

Diotima adds weight to her argument by pointing out that, "animals, birds, as well as beasts," desire procreation, and, "are in agony when they take the infection of love, which begins with the desire of union, whereto is added the case of offspring or whose behalf the weakest are ready to battle against the strongest ever to the utmost, and to die for them, and will let themselves be tormented with hunger or suffer anything in order to maintain their young."

Diotima will soon apply a hierarchy or ascent factor to the divine wonders of love. She will lead Socrates to mystical heights in a vivid transcendent space that no Western author would approach till Beatrice led Dante into Paradise—yes, that is a large statement, but consider all the western European literature in-between and only Christ's transfiguration on a mount before three apostles holds the same awesome mystic scale. What is so impressive about Diotima is she can move to

such heights and yet not forget the common, everyday, world around her, where the magnificence of God's creation also comes shining through.

Diotima next tells Socrates that she has so far spoken only of the "lesser mysteries" of love. Yet she has more to say, not much more, but perhaps the most renowned words in a Platonic work, certainly the most influential for Renaissance writers, not least being Shakespeare. In today's popular jargon, the term Platonic love has been sadly diminished into buffoonery or nonsense. This is most unfortunate, and as acute an example of ignorance as Socrates would be likely to find. But let Diotima give her short speech on the true reality of divine love—Platonic love—and the reader will feel awe, reverence, gratitude for the term. Because Diotima's passage is so important to Renaissance studies, we quote almost in full:

These are the lesser mysteries of love, into which even you, Socrates, may enter; to the greater and more hidden ones which are the crown of these, and to which, if you pursue them in a right spirit, they will lead, I know not whether you will be able to obtain. But I will do my utmost to inform you, and do you follow if you can. For he who would proceed aright in this matter should begin in youth to visit beautiful forms; and first, if he be guided by his instructor aright, to love one such form only—out of that he should create fair thoughts; and soon he will of himself perceive that the beauty of one form is akin to the beauty of another; and then if beauty of form in general is his pursuit, how foolish would he be not to recognize that the beauty in every form is one

and the same! And when he perceives this he will abate his violent love of the one, which he will despise and deem a small thing, and he will become a lover of all beautiful forms; in the next stage he will consider that the beauty of the mind is more honorable than the beauty of the outward form. So that if a virtuous soul have but a little comeliness, he will be content to love and tend him, and will search out and bring to the birth thoughts which may improve the young, until he is compelled to contemplate the beauty of institutions and laws, and to understand that the beauty of them all is of one family, and personal beauty is a trifle.

Diotima keeps on about institutions and sciences, until her impressive coda which leads Socrates, “towards and contemplating the vast sea of beauty, he will create many fair and noble thoughts and notions in boundless love and wisdom until on that shore he grows and waxes strong, and at last the vision is revealed to him of a single science, which is the science of beauty everywhere.”

Ficino assigned (by lot) Tommaso Benci the difficult task of providing commentary on Diotima. Benci finds different phrases for the same thing, “Therefore, the prime and true beauty is not in bodies. Consider also the fact that many bodies are called by the same nature, Beauty.” Benci now completes the third part of his syllogism. “Therefore, there must be in many bodies one common nature of beauty through which they are alike called beautiful.” This comes very close to circular reasoning, but we shall let that pass. Benci does distinguish between moral virtues—justice, courage, temperance—and

intellectual virtues, which come prior—wisdom, knowledge, prudence. Beni talks about Angelic Mind and the One itself, but of course we have heard this before. He does make an interesting comment on heat and infinity; if heat is not held down by cold and moisture, it becomes infinite. Beni might have been reading Nicholas of Cusa, the first great philosopher of the infinites but he has studied little math.

The speeches of the *Symposium* are over—who could possibly top Diotima—but not the banquet itself. So far the guests, though mildly imbibing, have behaved with splendid manners—in the midst of debating controversial matters, no rude or heated interruptions have occurred—but this shall suddenly change with the drunken brawling entrance of Alcibiades, who is permitted to stay because the others have such good manners. Plato's people do not preach or even discuss good manners, but they do consistently practice them, yet another reason why the dialogues can be so pleasant to read. When Alcibiades finally calms himself sufficiently to talk, his topic is Socrates. This rambling oration has rather a tacked-on quality, not an integral part of the *Symposium*, rather like the tale of Atlantis does not seem an integral part of *Timaeus*. Alcibiades relates Socrates' spellbounding powers of speech, his amazing physical endurance during warfare—he walks barefoot through snow, he neither tires nor hungers—and his unique ability to stand lost in thought, working out a philosophical conundrum standing outdoors, where all Athens can see him, day to night, night to dawn, till he has solved his problem and can commence the day's activities as though nothing unusual was happening.

When the banquet finally does close, Socrates will stay on all night, deep in conversation with two others. We do not

know what was discussed, only that sunrise found Socrates closing this Platonic masterpiece by proclaiming an expert playwright should be able to compose both comedy and tragedy—it almost seems he had Shakespeare in mind.

Chapter Five:

Ficino and Plato's *Phaedrus*

A Platonist can approach his subject in the same manner as a Biblical fundamentalist who comes across a deeply troubling passage—he can search around elsewhere in the master's corpus till he finds a passage that agrees with his own notions. If a Biblical literalist dislikes the passage about giving all his money to the poor—hey, this would make me poor!—he searches about till he finds the passage about rendering under Caesar, which does not prevent him from giving a little to the poor but largely keeps his bulging purse intact. Likewise Plato's admirers are often disturbed by the master's harsh, negative comments about poets in *The Republic*. Plato sounds all too much like Alan Bloom blaming rock 'n roll on the perilous decline of culture in American life. But our Platonist can always rise above this comparison—seek another text, and no text from the ancient Hellenic world finds a higher value for true poets than Plato's *Phaedrus*. The Platonist need not give all his money to the poor. Rather, he can focus on the dialogue that most pleases him.

Ficino both translated *Phaedrus* and provided the work with an extended commentary. Plato listed four ways a human can benefit from frenzy: the prophetic, the orgiastic, the poetic, the lover. Ficino, a priest, did not touch the orgiastic. He did not consider himself a prophet, and since he did not live until 1900, the limit of his deep influence on writers, he could not see how his humility was misplaced. What Ficino does is combine the poet and lover, often inextricably so, in praise of Beauty. He has become a Neo-Platonist, a follower of Plotinus in his commentary. Plato's poet achieves greatness by truly working himself into a frenzy, while Ficino's bard, supposedly from the same source, is far more subdued.

Ficino's poet is to love beautiful things, then beautiful people, thereby working his soul's way upward to the Platonic Form of Beauty. Obviously this bears a close resemblance to Diotima's oration at the close of *The Symposium*. When speaking of love, Ficino is always working towards beauty, and when he combines these two Forms, he is never far from Diotima. When he contemplates love—contemplation might be Ficino's favorite word, often symbolized by an infant child—Diotima is always close by. Hence we have the importance of the *Phaedrus* commentary; Ficino moves Diotima ever forward into the Renaissance, Italian and English, Calvalcanti and Shakespeare, on and beyond.

Ficino, the priest, makes a quiet rebellion against his Catholic Church in his *Phaedrus* commentary. Several times he emphasizes how the human soul is self-moving. Plato would have agreed, but felt no need for Ficino's soft, deft hammer blows about the matter. So what is Ficino, always the cautious theological diplomat, after? The Catholic Church followed Aristotle, who had been explicated in many thick volumes of

Latin prose by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). A cornerstone of this theology were the five proofs of God articulated by Aquinas. In effect, Aquinas had one serious proof, which he either shared with Aristotle or learned from him, and which his over-subtle mind conveyed with much repetition in five ways. The phrase theme and variations works quite well here.

So what is this monumental proof? It might be worth looking at since it held Christian belief for half a millennium, not to mention Aristotle's followers who might still be among us. All effects, like movement, must have a cause. Hence each cause was once an effect and thereby it required a cause. This process can go on a very long time, perhaps ad nauseam, but not forever. Eventually there must be a cause which is its own cause—this is the first cause, which Aristotle called the Prime Mover, and Aquinas called Almighty God. Very few have worshipped the Prime Mover. Almighty God has caused multitudes to honor, love, and fear him by an addition of numerous supernal traits, but he must have that initial, all-important trait—First Cause—or else all turns to fluff, or so taught five centuries of Christian theology.

Notice how persistently Ficino rebels against this in his *Phaedrus* commentary. Nobody believed in the Deity more than Ficino, but he does challenge the notion of First Cause. Ficino finds all human souls to be self-moving. This is a powerfully, profound statement in the Quattrocento. Put simply, if the soul can move itself, all by itself, there is no path back to a previous cause, not a single one, and surely no long, mind-boggling long path back to a First Cause. Hence Aquinas' proof—he truly only had one—is quietly set aside and the cosmos keeps moving along quite nicely.

Other aspects of the *Phaedrus* commentary are not so important, though perhaps better remembered. Ficino believes in a World Soul, showing a source in Plotinus rather than Plato or Scripture. Perhaps this World Soul has no need of endless empirical causes, but Ficino does not say. Thoth is praised as the divine father of human writing, so *Hermetica* and Plato are joined, far from a first time in Ficino. Ficino's devotion to hierarchy endures, as he puts together a chain of being with four parts: intelligible, intellectual, animate, corporeal. Plato lists nine reincarnations in order of merit, and Ficino lists those, the last being a tyrant. This list shows Ficino as a dutiful scholar, not a believer. Reincarnation? He was a priest. He had widely-varying beliefs, which put together make him one of philosophy's great originals, but he was a pious scholar, steeped in contemplation, perhaps ready to risk his neck or reputation, ever so slightly, but never his soul.

Chapter Six:

Ficino's Major Astrology

All Ficino's work with Plato had a solid, lasting influence. But three of his works transformed Renaissance poets and painters in substantial ways difficult to imagine today; we still read Plato, with great attention and respect, but astrology has been transferred to the sidelines of the comic strips of our daily newspapers. Political figures, not good ones anyway, do not look there for advice or opinion. But the eras of Ficino to Einstein were immersed in astrology. Ficino's contemporaries spent more time with astrology than nutrition or exercise habits. Reason? They wanted long life and good health, and the above two could not be trusted. Astrology, however, was old, reliable, the most trusted of established traditions, highly respected, and no one in the Quattrocento knew more about astrology than Ficino.

We mentioned his three transformative works. The first was his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The year was 1464, the starting point for the vast, many-faceted Hermetic movement that would thrive throughout western Europe for the next two centuries. In 1468, while still a young man, only

thirty-five, Ficino composed his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*. This was the first (and perhaps the best) Renaissance love treatise. Hundreds would follow, with Italy the dominant country. These treatises would explicate in excruciating detail the ever shifting joys and pains of romantic love, and the greatest expression of this complex topic, and a watershed in European literature, would be found in the Elizabethan sonneteers.

Twenty-one years would pass before Ficino published his third transformative work, and of course the subject was astrology, but it was an all-inclusive, purposive astrology unlike any treatment previously written. Ficino was a practicing astrologer. He could not have gathered and retained so much stellar information otherwise. He was a physician, and astral medicine was a primary part of his practice. A concoction of herbs and roots might not adequately heal the patient if necessary stars were not in the correct position. Italy's universities had renowned medical faculties in Ficino's era, and their medical students were required to take courses in astrology. Ficino the man of medicine had not crawled far out alone on a limb. His astrology was mainstream. He differed in convincingly doing it better and not stepping on the fingers of the Catholic Church. He was also a priest. He had to tread his path very carefully.

Ficino presented his astrology as the third part of his *Three Books of Life*, a virtuoso display of Renaissance learning that would hold readers spellbound for centuries afterwards. By 1647 over thirty editions had appeared. Throughout all three books, Ficino combined his roles as priest-magus-physician. He had a gift for working in threes. He correctly expected scholars to absorb his efforts, and worried about the sedentary life-style

of his readers, who spent far too much time sitting at one place at one time. It might be noted this was largely how Ficino lived his life. Melancholy can result, as well as health problems associated with black bile. A necessary balance can be achieved by seeking strong influences from the Sun and Jupiter. The best medicine is astral medicine.

We need note Ficino lived before Copernicus, and never considered the earth might not be the center of the cosmos. The Sun was just another planet, like Venus and Mars. The Moon was also a planet. The Earth, as the center of all creation, was a unique, grace-filled, heaven-blessed, single entity. For Ficino, defining the Earth as a planet would have been irreverent and disrespectful to the Creator, and this tendency never entered his astrology. He believed three planets were especially beneficial to humans, which he called the three graces; Jupiter, Sun, Venus. He liked threes. His honored place in Renaissance studies is not based on astrology or astronomy, though these terms were interchangeable during Ficino's time and long after.

Three Books of Life was meant to be intensely practical. It is not a self-help book, for it takes in far too much knowledge, too many kinds of knowledge, for that. Book One provides instructions on a healthy life, and Book Two offers guidance on how to live a long life. No one reads these books today. Ficino's medical advice is based on Galen's four humours. He would not have healed many people based on that theory.

Book Three is Ficino's magnum opus on astrology, often published apart from the other two sections. For scholars after 1700, it almost seems those other two sections never happened at all. Ficino's Latin title for Book Three is *De Vita coelitus comparanda*. He wrote the text in Latin. Our English translation is Kaske and Clark. Translating the title has never

gone smoothly. D. P. Walker, in a footnote on page 3 of his *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, offers two possibilities: on obtaining life from the heavens, or, instituting one's life celestially. Walker writes, "in view of Ficino's fondness for puns, it probably means both." Walker published in 1958. We can assume Ficino would be deeply pleased to amuse a worthy scholar four centuries later.

The bibliographic history of Book Three, whatever the title, is interesting. Ficino was a devoted scholar of Plotinus. If we read Plotinus today, and hopefully we will, we might have Ficino to thank. From 1482 to 1492, Ficino produced translations and commentaries of Plotinus, as well as the two other great Neo-Platonists, Proclus and Porphyry. Again Ficino worked in threes. A significant section of the Plotinus commentary was a long tract on astrology. Ficino must have had good feelings about this piece. He neatly removed it from his Plotinus work, and placed it as Book Three of *Three Books of Life*. Hence one work served two purposes. This should not be too confusing.

In spite of the popularity of Ficino's edition of Plotinus, his long astrological treatise reached its greatest audience as the third book of his all-purpose health volume. From there it gradually took on a life of its own and came to be published on its own. Either way, whatever the English title, *De Vita coelitus comparanda* is long enough to stand alone as a hefty book. Ficino wrote twenty-six chapters. He did not repeat himself. He mentions other sources—great names of the past—but he does not rely on them. He uses Aquinas for support for what he teaches, knowing he will have no better protection from the Catholic Church than Aquinas, and yet he remains independent. The reader who wants Ficino will be getting Ficino. The great

magus-astrologer has at last revealed all the stellar-celestial knowledge the human intellect is capable of mastering. You do not simply read Ficino's astrology. You pick apart each phrase, one at a time, and master his arguments. If you were born before the telescope, you are never likely to learn more.

We need a title, and so we propose, *On Leading the Celestial Life*. Ficino dedicated this third section to Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary. Ficino made the dedication from Florence on July 10, 1489. No evidence exists that he ever crossed paths with the King, but he did promise long life to the monarch. King Matthias died two weeks later. If these were the first pages Ficino wrote, he was not discouraged. He was never reported to have a large following in Hungary.

Ficino added a second dedication to the reader, stating, "I do not approve as much as I report." We assume this remark was Ficino's opening effort to keep the Church at bay. This becomes a minor theme throughout *The Celestial Life*. No reader of the entire work could take the disclaimer seriously. He was a dedicated healer who relied on the stars to activate his medicines. He was a dedicated priest who relied on the celestial power of the stars to bring souls closer to their Creator. His disclaimer was a spur to action, and thus begins the opening chapter, where Ficino will set in place the cosmic structure that will persist throughout his astrological compendium. The reader must know exactly where he is before he can go anywhere.

The structure is Platonic with emphasis on the Ideal Form, also called the Idea. Plato himself never got more mileage out of any drawn-out thought than this conception. What matters to Ficino are mediators or links, for the Intellect and Soul of the World, and for human intellect and human soul—all these essentially Platonic concepts must be connected,

lastingly connected, with ever smooth paths between everlasting cosmic concepts, not unlike the blood stream in a healthy human body or the electrical circuits in a well-run, modern apartment house. We are struggling for images just like Ficino. He chose the term spirit. No theological writer ever got so much use out of the word spirit. Spirit unites the microcosm and the macrocosm, the human and the divine, the earth and the heavens, the sunflower called the heliotrope and the Sun. Each human has a soul and intellect, and these must work together for vital functioning. Soul and intellect are connected by spirit.

Before astrology could be of any help, the human must have his spirit working, for this spirit directly connects with the astral spirit that connects the World Soul with The Divine Intellect. The astral spirit has borrowed its adjectives, for it truly belongs to the World Soul and Divine Intellect. Their spirit works in many ways besides astral or astrological, though these terms are what Ficino will eventually concentrate on, if we can ever move him past his first chapter. Divine spirit is used when a Platonic Form or Idea—the perfect form of tree or joy or rabbit or love—connects with the World Soul or human soul. Hence divine spirit is of the utmost importance. The cosmos, as Ficino pictures it, would be struggling to function without it.

Astrology is based on the premise of divine spirit functioning as astral spirit moving downward from the various stars and planets to the human spirits who require their benefits and have performed specific astral rites to attract them. Those astral rites are the basis of Ficino's astrology, the solid and ever varying material for the rest of his long treatise. He is the ultimate magus bringing together the microcosm and macrocosm, the human and divine. No one else has ever done it so convincingly, in such copious detail, with clear, incisive

instructions a person of average intellect can understand. Of course Ficino requires faith, considerable faith, several layers, deeply felt.

Ficino functions as a physician when he attempts to define spirit. This quote also appears on page 3 of D. P. Walker's study. We start quoting from Walker, "Soldiers, says Ficino, care for their arms, musicians for their instruments, hunters for their hounds ..." Walker's text now shifts to a direct quote from Ficino, as shall we:

only the priests of the Muses, only the hunters after the supreme good and truth are so negligent (alas) and so unfortunate that they seem utterly to neglect the instrument by which they can, in a way, measure and grasp the whole world. An instrument of this sort is the spirit, which by the physicians is defined as a certain vapour of the blood, pure, subtle, hot and lucid. And, formed from the subtler blood by the heat of the heart, it flies to the brain, and there the soul assiduously employs it for the exercise of both the interior and exterior senses. Thus the blood serves the spirit, the spirit the senses, and finally the sense reason.

This is as close as Ficino comes to a single, precise definition of spirit in humans, and yet he defines it each time he shows it coming to life in his astrally-inclined cosmos. Man's behavior is conjoined with specific planets. Once a person has discovered his connection, he can increase or decrease his spirit's joining with this planet's powers by specific acts. Our behavior can bring us close to a planet or take us away. It is time for a long explanatory quote from Ficino's second chapter.

Always remember that through a given effect and pursuit of our mind and through the very quality of our spirit we are easily and quickly exposed to those planets which signify the same affect, quality, and pursuit. Hence, by withdrawal from human affairs, by leisure, solitude, constancy, by theology, the more esoteric philosophy, superstition, magic, agriculture, and by sorrow, we come under the influence of Saturn. We come under the influence of Jupiter by civic occupations, by those occupations which strive for honor, by natural philosophy, by the kind of philosophy which most people can understand, by civil religion, and by laws; of Mars, by anger and contests; of the Sun and Mercury, by the pursuit of eloquence, of song, of truth, and of glory, and by skill; of Venus, by gaiety and music and festivity; of the Moon, by a vegetable existence. But keep in mind this difference between them: the more public and grand exercise of one's wits pertains to the Sun, the more private and that given over to skill and ingenuity rather to Mercury. Likewise, solemn music belongs to Jupiter and the Sun, merry music to Venus, the middle sort to Mercury. There is a similar system with regard to the fixed stars. This is the rule common to the human species.

Chapter Two is filled with essential information. Ficino was an important forerunner of the long Renaissance obsession with alchemy, and he places a foundation with specific astral influences of metals. An alchemist in the lab would not have

turned this passage aside without several careful readings, perhaps memorization. Ficino is providing metallic specifics of getting astral gifts from specific planets. Again, Chapter Two:

To get something from Saturn, we use any materials that are somewhat earthy, dusky and leaden; we use smoky jasper, lodestone, cameo and chalcedony; gold and golden marcasite are partly useful for this. From Mars, materials which are fiery or red, red brass, all sulphurous things, iron, and bloodstone. Do not doubt that Saturn has quite a bit to do with gold. His weight leads people to believe so; furthermore, gold, being similar to the Sun, is by the same token in all metals in the way that the Sun is in all the planets and stars.

These are metals with metaphysical powers, but alchemy is about that. An alchemist would never have missed the references to “sulphurous” and “iron.” If gold is in all metals, then a good-sized chunk of lead holds welcome potential for the ambitious alchemist. If Saturn is straight overhead, he can light his alembic.

Ficino pays special attention to the Moon in Chapter Six. As a physician, he is a moderate Galenist, which means he evaluates each patient’s necessary tendency to maintain an internal balance between hot and cold, dryness and moisture. Ficino could also have learned this from Aristotle’s followers. For a remedy, he relies on the phases of the Moon.

We quote Ficino.

Therefore the safest way will be to do nothing without the favor of the Moon, since she

conveys heavenly things generally, frequently, and easily to things below. They call her a second Sun because she creates in any month four seasons of the year. For in her first quarter the Peripatetics think the Moon is hot and moist; the second, hot and dry; in the third, cold and dry; and in the fourth, cold and moist. They believe that her light is indubitably the light of the Sun; that she rules moisture and generation and measures out all the changes of the foetus in the womb by her own changes, and that as often as the Moon is in conjunction with the Sun, she receives a life-giving power from him which she infuses in her moisture; and she receives from Mercury in the same place a force which blends her moistures.

Ficino cannot stop without concluding his thoughts on Mercury. He must keep the connections going. That is his style. That is his method. His astrology is built on unceasing connections. Otherwise he would not place so much emphasis on spirit. Let him continue for two more uninterrupted sentences.

Mercury has this force both by virtue of his own transformation into all other planets and by virtue of his many revolutions. Likewise at the same time and place she receives a force from Venus which conduces to forms suitable for generation.

Where did Venus come from all of a sudden? Answer: she was always there. The gender of the pronoun is essential. Otherwise we would not know for certain which planet Ficino is

talking about. Venus is feminine, not surprisingly. So is the Moon, but here Ficino is talking about Venus. He is not a good writer for speed-readers. In our current context, Mercury is masculine, but in the work's final chapter, number twenty-six, Ficino finds such heightened powers in Mercury that the lightning-like planet is hermaphroditic. Ficino does save his best for his close.

We require one long, final quote from Chapter Six, because we cannot describe Ficino better than when he takes on a head of steam and shows us. A celestial life is filled with rich passages.

Now fiery things aid the attractive power, earthy things the retentive power, airy the digestive, and watery the expulsive. If you want to help all these in yourself, strengthen especially the attractive power through fiery things, when the Moon is set in fiery signs or positions (namely in Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius) and aspects Jupiter. Aid the retentive through earthy things especially when the Moon is located in earthy signs or positions (Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn) and aspects him. The digestive and generative virtue is aided through airy things, as often as the Moon under airy signs (Gemini, Libra, and Aquarius) aspects or approaches Jupiter. The expulsive virtue is aided through the watery, that is, when the Moon placed under watery signs (that is, Cancer, Pisces, and Scorpio) is illuminated by the rays of Jupiter. But especially will you attain that which you desire in all these areas if Jupiter

occupies the same, similar, or at least not very different signs or positions as the Moon.

For a modern this is not easy reading, largely because we do not believe the utter truth of what he is saying. But that is exactly how his original audience read this material. Ficino was speaking precise absolute truths about ultimate reality. He was the Bohr and Einstein of his century and the next.

We continue our quote uninterrupted with Ficino, the physician, offering practical medical applications of his cosmic knowledge.

If you are going to stimulate the bowels with solid medicines, look to Pisces; with liquid medicines, Scorpio; and with something in between, Cancer. If you are going to purge through the lower part, look to Pisces and Scorpio; if through the upper part, Cancer. Avoid the malefic aspect of Saturn and Mars towards the Moon, for the former disturbs the stomach, the latter disturbs the intestines. Avoid Capricorn and Taurus, for they bring nausea. You know not to irritate a part of the body when the Moon occupies the sign ruling it (for indeed she moves the fluids) but rather to foster that part.

A modern patient with bowel difficulties would be terrified to encounter a doctor with Ficino's methods. A quick flight out of the office would be appropriate. But Ficino's contemporaries would gladly have trusted their health to him, any aspect of their health, at any time of their life. We do not know exactly how often Ficino actually practiced medicine. Medical professors do not always treat patients, but no records exist whether or not this is true in Ficino's case. We cannot

even be certain how much behind-the-rostrum teaching he did. But he entered an age steeped in astrological medicine and he—and he alone—mastered it. He walked the lovely streets of Florence with heads nodding in deep respect. Yet he did little to promote himself. He did not have to. His powerful reputation only required the remarkable display of acceptable knowledge in his writings. He was a quiet man, soft spoken. He even spoke with a slight lisp. The quieter his manner, the more towering his reputation became. Modern physicians would do well to imitate his manner. Medical procedures are bound to change over the centuries, but a deep-rooted respect for the patient should never be out of style.

We need to return to Ficino's text. He recommends engravings on materials to attract astral powers. This is basic astrology, but Ficino needs to be certain he is not offending his Catholic Church. His readers might forget he is a priest, but Ficino is unlikely to do so. He turns to Thomas Aquinas, both a saint and the fountainhead of his church's theology. Aquinas had an opinion about almost everything, so it might be interesting to find out what the great man said about astrology. Surprisingly, Aquinas believed the astral power—from stars and planets to puny humans down here below—did truly exist. Ficino is so far walking on solid ground, but he still needs to tread carefully.

Aquinas is not impressed with astral images carved on materials. He is not being inconsistent. He believes the astral power resides in the material alone. The engraving has nothing to do with it. Hence if a plate of plain ordinary tin can attract powers from Jupiter, the simple plate is doing the work. An occult engraving on the plate is not necessary. It will not help. It might even be offensive. It might even attract evil demons, and

Aquinas of all people does not want that. Again the modern mind might find it difficult to conceive how deeply the highly intelligent people of past times believed in such strange, arcane matters. Aquinas apparently spent a lot of time worrying about demons. Ficino did not. He probably slept better, enjoyed his meals more, made more friends.

But Ficino was wise in paying careful respect to Aquinas. Ficino was fascinated with the astral designs that could be engraved on metals or stones. With Ficino's rich descriptions, this astral signifying becomes a minor art form, quite similar to the cryptic, mystifying art that enriched so many future alchemical treatises. The art of astrology and alchemy is based on symbols, which require specialized knowledge to comprehend. Ficino explains many of the astral symbols, another reason his work was so immensely popular. He strays far from Aquinas in his numerous symbolic revelations. But he might not feel so safe and free if he had not extensively and reverently touched hands with the great theologian of the past.

In a future chapter on Cornelius Agrippa, author of an encyclopedic work on magic published in 1533, Agrippa also produced a descriptive account of astral images, using precise details like Ficino.

Agrippa's entire work was mightily influenced by Ficino, as we shall discuss. Astral art can be considered as a Renaissance art form called emblems. Agrippa lived to see the great burgeoning popularity of emblems throughout western Europe. We discuss emblems in our Agrippa chapter. We mention the subject now because Ficino's astral art contains remarkable similarities to emblems. Ficino died a generation before the emblem craze started, but he was an important forerunner and we do not want to forget that.

Ficino was always the scholar. He was especially impressed by astral art because several images could be traced back to the ancient world. Several Roman emperors and late medieval kings would not poke their head outdoors without consulting their astrologers.

We again quote from Ficino, this time from Chapter Eighteen.

But let us go back to recounting the opinions of others as we began. To obtain long life, the ancients used to make an image of Saturn from the stone Feyrizech, that is, sapphire, in the hour of Saturn, when he was ascending and fortunately placed. The form was this: an old man sitting on a rather high throne or on a dragon, his head covered with a dark linen cloth, raising his hands above his head, holding in his hand a sickle or some fish, and clothed in a dusky robe.

Ficino has told us how to live a long life. But what if his follower wants more? What if the reader wants to enjoy that long life? Ficino continues uninterrupted with his next astral image.

For a long and happy life, they make an image of Jupiter in clear or white stone. It was a man crowned, sitting on an eagle or a dragon, wearing a yellow robe, made in the hour of Jupiter when he was fortunately ascending in his exaltation.

Ficino continues describing astral images in this vein for several pages. He had a strong visual imagination, which might be what Botticelli liked so much about him. Ficino also

discusses the cross as the greatest of astral images. He notes how the ancient world used the cross to measure forms in the night sky that sought both geometry and astrology. Ficino insists those ancients were unknowing forerunners of Christians who would revere the cross in so many ways. He avoids all arcane lore and eccentricity in his final reverent summation of the cross. No other magus would have taken so much time with a Christian symbol. No other magus ventured so far in so many directions and yet remained in the good graces of his all-powerful church.

Ficino did bring controversy on himself in 1464 with a short section of his translation of Hermes Trismegistus. The translation, as we know, came in two parts: a collection of fourteen dialogues, the *Hermetica*, and a treatise called *Asclepius*. In the latter, one short section, a paragraph really, talks about bringing divine life into statues. Western Europe believed this was possible because the magical power of ancient Egypt was limitless. It is easy for moderns to forget that Thrice-Great Hermes was Egyptian, more powerful than any pharaoh, as great a magus as Moses or Aaron. Hence a brief passage about statues miraculously coming to life would be taken very seriously, since that was exactly the attitude towards Hermes, the Egyptian Thoth.

D P. Walker considers this brief passage in *Asclepius* to be highly significant. In his excellent study of several Renaissance magicians, starting with Ficino, ending with Campanella, our scholar uses the statue-making passage as a barometer to test or evaluate the intensity of the magus's efforts. Walker found it was a rare Renaissance magus who did not look at this brief passage very carefully.

With the possible exception of Frances Yates, D. P. Walker might know more about Renaissance magic than any scholar in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet curiously Walker overlooks Ficino's return to the *Asclepius* passage twenty-five years later, in the twenty-sixth and final chapter of *The Celestial Life*, the work under study. Even more curious is Ficino's compulsion to return to the only topic his church severely frowned at—then and today. That final chapter is a summation, a glorification of astrology, a tribute to Plotinus. Recall this entire work originally was part of a commentary on Plotinus. Apparently Plotinus also believed in statue-making, and that was reason enough to bring it in.

But when the *Asclepius* talks about bringing divine life into small statues, the passage is brief. In his Chapter Twenty-Six, Ficino writes extensively on the subject. In 1490 he would be accused of heresy by the Vatican under Pope Innocent VIII for all the astrology in his three-part book. The accusation did not stick, perhaps because it was much too vague, perhaps because Ficino uttered sufficient declaimers. He had to expect trouble when he wrote of living statues. But why then? He had obviously become a believer. He had spent a quarter century thinking it out. He trusted his instincts. Bringing red-clay statues to life could be done. He had no other reason to write so convincingly about it. He was not a risk-taker. He had to know Aquinas would be rolling over in his grave.

Again we need to quote Ficino in his twenty-sixth chapter to know exactly what he is talking about. The passage is too long to be quoted in full, but length is part of the story.

Plotinus uses almost the same examples in that place where, paraphrasing Hermes Trismegistus, he says that the ancient priests or Magi used to

capture in statues and material sacrifices something divine and wonderful. He holds, moreover, with Hermes Trismegistus that through these materials they did not, properly speaking, capture divinities wholly separate from matter but deities who are merely cosmic, as I said from the beginning and as Synesius demonstrates—cosmic, I say, that is, a life or something vital from the *anima mundi* and the souls of the spheres and of the stars or even a motion and, as it were, a vital presence from the daemons.

Daemons should put the fear of the Lord in Ficino, and yet his faith in magic is too powerful for that. He was a most unusual priest. But Ficino has at last brought Plotinus into the discussion and with Plotinus he will stay. Our quote continues:

Indeed the same Hermes, whom Plotinus follows, holds that daemons of this kind—airy ones, not celestial, let alone any higher—are themselves present all along in the materials and that Hermes himself put together statues from herbs, trees, stones, and spices, which had within themselves, as he says, a natural force of divinity. He added songs resembling the heavenly bodies; he says the divinities take delight in such songs and so stay a longer time in the statues and help people or harm them. He adds that once the wise men of Egypt, who were also priests, since they were unable to persuade the people by reasoning that there were gods, that is, certain spirits superior to mankind,

thought up this magical lure through which they could allure daemons into the statues and thereby show that divinities exist.

Ficino has demonstrated, in the most roundabout of ways, that divinities exist. He has much more to say about talking statues. He is an author fascinated with his own subject, and he had a wide audience to share this interest. Ficino becomes vague when he again brings Thomas Aquinas into his discussion. A final chapter would somehow be lacking without Aquinas. Aquinas denies astral powers can influence, and yet he admits that statues have been known to talk. As always, Aquinas has a ready answer: if statues talk, it is assuredly daemons doing the talking. Aquinas had an unswerving faith in daemons. For all his brilliance, he was still locked in the middle ages.

Ficino got past that. He was a magus, but not demon-crazed. In his extended statue passage, he briefly touches on Aquinas and moves on. If he deals fully with Aquinas' argument, then he has to set aside both Plotinus and Hermes Trismegistus, and Ficino could never do that. He brings Porphyry, then Iamblichus, into the debate to counter Aquinas. Iamblichus gets the last line, "true and certain prophecy cannot come from such evil daemons, nor is it produced by human arts or by nature; it is only produced in purified minds by divine inspiration."

Ficino is now back on safe, familiar ground. Having somewhat awkwardly set Aquinas aside, he returns to Plotinus and Trismegistus.

But now let us get back to Hermes, or rather to Plotinus. Hermes says that the priests received an appropriate power from the nature of the cosmos

and mixed it. Plotinus follows him and thinks that everything can be easily accomplished by the intermediation of the *anima mundi*, since the *anima mundi* generates and moves the forms of natural things through certain seminal seasons implanted in her from the divine. These reasons he even calls gods, since they are never cut off from the Ideas of the Supreme Mind.

We are getting close to the end of the entire work. Enter Plato. The Ideas of the Supreme Mind originated with Plato, as no one knew better than Ficino. We need to quote a few more sentences.

He thinks, therefore, that through such seminal reasons the *anima mundi* can easily apply herself to materials since she has formed them to begin with through these same seminal reasons, when a Magus or a priest brings to bear at the right time rightly grouped forms of things—forms which properly aim towards one reason or another, as the lodestone towards iron, rhubarb towards choler, saffron towards the heart, agrimony and spodium towards the liver, spikenard and musk towards the brain.

Just when Ficino seems hopelessly lost in cosmic abstractions, he lands firmly on earth with specifics of the natural world he could only have learned traipsing the hills and fields around Florence. He uses his final chapter to define the planet Mercury as an hermaphrodite, which causes all kinds of new astrological possibilities, but we can overlook those passages. It is curious how much more about talking statues Ficino learned in those twenty-five years.

We will close our chapter with Ficino's ideas about song. D. P. Walker made these same points in the first chapter of his famous book. In simplest terms, the words and melody of the song move directly through the air and reach the human spirit with no physical interference. The hollow passages of the ear do not count. Other art forms require a physical interference, such as the function of the eyes in viewing an oil painting. Music is the purest art. Music with words is the highest form of art. Ficino was a fine singer who accompanied himself on string instruments. He was versatile. He considered himself an Orphic performer. He never ceased to connect himself to the hallowed past. Today Ficino is the hallowed past, and we honor him by our thorough study.

Chapter Seven:

Ficino's Minor Astrology

Later in this volume, we encounter the problem of Cornelius Agrippa. In 1531, he publishes a book which provides a long detailed study of the rarity and uselessness of occult knowledge, as well as most other areas of knowledge. Agrippa left no stone unturned. Between 1531 and 1533, Agrippa published a three-volume work titled *The Occult Philosophy*, an encyclopedic how-to book on the occult arts, which provides numerous precise examples of how to perform successful sympathetic magic, astrology, divining, and so on. This latter title was the best-selling work on magic or the occult for the sixteenth century. The obvious question arises: what exactly did Agrippa believe, if anything?

This same problem, on a much smaller level, applies to Ficino. We have already discussed his mastery of astrology, and we have no reason to doubt Ficino's firm trust in what he was saying. We can set aside his occasional disclaimer about explicating astrology rather than practicing. He could not have attained so much knowledge of the stars without working with them. He was a physician who practiced astral medicine, and

apparently believed he had attained frequent success. Yet his complete works are prevented from consistency by three short pieces that attack astrology.

Again we have the Agrippa dilemma, and yet the problem is miniature by comparison. Ficino's contradictory works are small, fragmentary. One is a letter, another is too short to be a pamphlet, and two could be pamphlets. The letter was written in 1494, near the close of his long career, and was not addressed to a pontiff or inquisition, but a poet, humanist, and presumably a friend, Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494). In a few cold, clear sentences, Ficino denies his astrological past. We quote:

Meanwhile, in the book *On the Sun*, I do not teach astronomy so much as seek through moral and allegorical matters to inquire into divine things. Finally, although in the *Books on Life*, *On the Sun* and *On Light* I mix poetic and philosophical matters and sometimes wander rather liberally, along with Plotinus. I act more specifically and sensely in order that the future may not be too ungrateful to me—astrological having been rejected by Mirandola. I rejoice with you, Poliziano, that the superstitious vanity was extinguished by him just as the venom of the Python was by Phoebus.

Venom of the Python? Ficino might have been an old man, but this remains a strange, sad letter from a great man. Angela Voss, a Ficino scholar at the University of Kent, Canterbury, and editor of the Ficino volume in the Western Esoteric Masters Series (from which we have quoted different texts from Ficino, as mentioned in our descriptive bibliography)

—Professor Voss is also troubled by this Poliziano letter, and we quote from her excellent introduction to her Ficino volume.

A letter to the poet Angelo Poliziano is a stark reminder of the anti-astrological atmosphere in Florence in the 1490s. For whatever reason, Ficino finds himself obliged to disavow any astrological belief, and argues that in his *Book of Life* he has simply been recounting Plotinus. The tone is severe and defensive, and not altogether convincing—in fact it is possible to sense an element of fear.

Voss' next statement enters melodrama, but she is worth following and she shows us the times.

Several members of the Academy were to die in suspicious circumstances soon after this letter was written, including Poliziano and Pico, whose massive *Disputations against divinatory astrology* Ficino endorses here. We do not understand, even now, why Pico was impelled to write such an unrelenting attack on astrology that, unlike Ficino's, even denies the possibility of symbolic understanding.

Voss further suggests that Savonarola's time in Florence put the fear of the Lord in both astrologers and Platonists. Pico was strongly influenced, and he would have read Ficino's unpublished treatise against astrology written in 1477. But Voss refuses to take this too seriously, and closes with a comic line. Perhaps this should be our attitude.

We do know, however, that the trio of Ficino, Pico, and Poliziano would get together with a

bottle of wine and laugh at the astrologers for their ignorant assumptions.

It is truly refreshing to find Ficino, for all his piety and intense seriousness, tilting back a bottle of wine and cutting up. This is not a staple of his writings. So was Ficino ever serious about astrology? D. P. Walker makes a useful point about Renaissance magicians which can help us here. Each magus thinks his own magic works and thereby is the real thing. The bad and false magic always belongs to the other guy. Walker might have the correct insight into the jovial behavior of Ficino and his two colleagues. They are not laughing at all astrology, of course not, but their merriment is directed towards bungling, incompetent, all-out stupid astrologers—the other guys. This does sound enjoyable, and Ficino's integrity is not seriously compromised. Given the wine, it might not be compromised at all.

In his short work, "A Disputation Against the Pronouncement of the Astrologers," Ficino's sense of humor comes to the surface again, though quietly. He comments, if astrologers—the other guys—are constantly making predictions, occasionally one of them will have to come true. Predict three dozen things and you are bound to get one right. This is not good astrology. This shows no sign of prophetic power. If you predict the weather for thirty consecutive days, eventually you will get a correct prediction. This does not make you an astrologer. There is no polite term for whatever you are not accomplishing.

Ficino wrote a much longer, pamphlet-length work with a similar title, *Disputation Against the Judgement of the Astrologers*. More than one bibliographer has probably gotten those titles confused. Ficino lists five events in the human birth

process that are so sacred they require proper astral signs. This might get complicated, perhaps even a little comical, but now Ficino is deeply serious. He emphasizes the imagination of the parents is more important than the configuration of the stars and planets, but the heavens bear close watching. Ficino is of course fence-straddling, but he is quite adept at it.

First, the planets and stars must be fortuitous during insemination. Ficino emphasizes this, which would require remarkable timing on the loving couple. If this first astral step goes wrong, the following are not likely to go well either. Second, the astral signs must be in good order when the male seed is placed and enclosed in the womb, and when the seed begins to congeal. Ficino knew very little genetics, nor did any other physician in his era. Third, the foetus at first formation is now linked with the universe, and takes on celestial and supercelestial possibilities. A modern right-to-lifer might want to look closely at this, if a chance existed Renaissance astrology might help current political arguments. Fourth—and this almost seems original with Ficino—the foetus, long before the birth date, tries to break out of the mother's womb. Ficino is not at all clear how the foetus attempts to do this, but the efforts must be limited, regardless of what the constellations overhead are doing. Fifth, the foetus becomes an infant, born from the womb, the precise moment when the all-important natal astrology begins.

Ficino emphasizes the immense difficulty of calculating this precise moment of birth, and this of course means natal astrology could never be accurate. Any competent thinker in the Quattrocento would have known this—it does not require a brilliant flash of profound insight—and yet every court or rich estate had its own astrologer, few generals wanted to lead troops

into battle without consulting an astrologer, and an upcoming bride and groom would not set the date without a detailed astrological consultation. Explanation? In astrological matters, close enough seems to be good enough. Also, Jupiter and Venus do not remain in the same important conjunction for a split second; the time span often lasts days or weeks, certainly adequate time for the human below to benefit or take steps to avoid malefic effects. Hence astrology had a solid credibility. The microcosm-macrocosm structure was firmly in place. The theme for the era still came from the legendary Emerald Tablet: as above, so below.

These solid supports for astrology also include Ficino. If that extended conjunction between Jupiter and Venus does not directly cause events or interfere with human free will, then it is acceptable for Ficino the astrologer to take that conjunction very seriously. This is his belief system. He is the practicing astrologer who remains a Catholic in good stead. He remains a priest. Ficino carefully and quietly stays on the right side of Aquinas on these matters—as a priest he would be a reckless fool not to—but he adds a new concept to astrology, new, powerful, quite beautiful. Astrology can be done by art. Angela Voss, our expert on Ficino and the stars, explains this, and we extensively quote her. She notes how Ficino nods his head to Aquinas and moves on.

But after thorough rejection, a new voice appears, in which Ficino brushes past Thomist orthodoxy and speaks with the Platonists, suggests that divination through art may indeed be the grounds for a revelation that is divine. As he explores the nature of prediction itself, he postulates that it is perfectly possible to know the

future—but not through the kind of limited speculation he has just condemned. It happens through a completely different mode of knowing—that induced in divination, whether by “divine infusion,” “natural instinct” or “by art”—of which astrology and augury are two forms. The augur or diviner needs technique, needs to know the rules, but within this framework his or her insight comes from another place. It is not a human judgement, but a divine inspiration, a “gift of the soul.”

Aquinas might have accepted the neat tap-dance over method by Ficino, but he would have rumbled from the depth of his deep belly at Angela Voss. Voss is bringing Ficino’s beloved Plato into her discussion of astrology as art. Her strategy is effective, and we need to continue quoting her. She provides a convincing answer to Ficino’s connection to the Agrippa dilemma.

Following the Platonic distinction between divine and human knowledge, Ficino suggests there is a great deal of difference between a merely human attempt to read the signs and the divine condition of Prophecy, which is inherent to all human beings, but which few are able to use. The ‘petty ogres’ do not realize this ability; they remain bound to a level of perception which is factual and literal, and most importantly, temporal.

Voss is getting some of her material from Ficino’s letters. He was a prolific writer of letters, and we shall devote a chapter to them. Our extensive Voss quote will end with a

section from a Ficino letter, which she might have revealed sooner. But all her comments are consistent with all we know about Ficino. He sought the spiritual wherever possible. He would always consider Plato and the Neo-Platonists to be sacred writers. Voss continues:

True prophetic utterance comes from a consciousness which transcends linear time, conveying truths directly from the eternal Mind itself—where past, present and future are one. The wiser the interpreter, the more accurately he or she will be able to read the message signified by the birds, or the stars, as Plotinus suggested, but this does not mean the stars have wills. Ficino agrees with the Neo-Platonists, that divination is a divine mode of perception, and will allow the soul to move nearer to the philosophical goal of intellectual knowledge.

Ficino received such knowledge in his treatise *The Star of the Magi*. He has no doubts a special star of incredible lasting brightness appeared when the Christ child was born, and an eclipse of the sun occurred, frighteningly so, when Christ expired on the cross. These two, remarkable astral phenomena did not cause the events; Ficino would violate all that he holds good and holy by saying that. But the star and eclipse are great, living, spiritual symbols of monumental human events. Ficino has reached his “philosophical goal of intellectual knowledge.” His symbols have transcended linear time, and what they represent “conveys truths directly from the eternal Mind itself.” Ficino has reached into the opening of John’s Gospel, which he assuredly knew well. He has given a display in vibrant, glowing

prose to set forth all Voss claims he is capable of. Ficino's prose approaches the high quality of art. Let Voss conclude.

The wise astrologers use the stars to understand the Providence of God; the ignorant create their own prison by imposing causal action on a realm whose truthful manner of revelation is that of the sign.

Aquinas can remain resting in his grave, though not without considerable stirring.

Chapter Eight:

Book of the Sun

Ficino's *The Book of the Sun* is considered a minor work, often overlooked. This should not be. The work is more a pamphlet than a book, but nowhere does Ficino show such a mastery of Neo-platonic writing. The Neo-platonist must convey a deep, sustained spirituality, which reaches the reader's own level of spirituality and lifts it several steps higher. This mystical content between author and reader is essential. The author seeks not just readers but followers. He will not convert by shouting from the podium. A quiet, fervent intensity is his method, with one beautifully-formed sentence following the other. The author supports himself with hallowed authorities from the past. In Ficino's case, this will be the distant past. He quotes from Plato, Iamblichus, Macrobius, but concludes with a long section from the apostle James.

Ficino intended *The Book of the Sun* to uplift his reader to the God of all creation. His extended method is long contemplative passages on the Sun. His numerous comments on the Sun are subtle, and on rare occasions, overly subtle or too subtle to follow clearly. This problem derives from his intention

to imitate closely an Egyptian magus in the ancient era of Thoth, or perhaps Thoth himself. Ficino never set small goals for himself. His source is the Hermetic books he translated, and yet nowhere do these books read as beautifully as *The Book of the Sun*. The subtleness is more a challenge to the devout, avid reader than a problem. This work is among the finest prose Ficino ever produced. It requires all the effort the author demands.

Ficino wrote about the Sun—more than had ever been said about the Sun until Copernicus—and we need present his arguments, his mingling of Egyptian and Christian. God is the Creator of all, including the Sun. The Sun provides the most wondrous entity of Creation: light. Light is a metaphor for God, who truly is the light of all creation. The Sun is also a metaphor for God, for exactly the same reasons. So far a Christian would stand solidly with us. Now enters the Egyptian magus—the Sun is not only a symbol for God the Creator, the Sun simultaneously is God the Creator. The pharaoh is sitting firmly on his throne.

God is good, the Platonic Ideal of good, and nothing can possibly be better than Plato's good. Divine light equals this good, and this light comes from both God and the Sun, which the Egyptian magus would consider one and the same source. Let us quote from Ficino. The opening of Chapter Two.

Nothing recalls the nature of goodness more than light. Firstly, light appears very pure and very exalted in the realm of the senses. Secondly, of all things it is most easily and widely radiated in an instant. Thirdly, it harmlessly encounters everything and penetrates it very gently and pleasantly. Fourthly, it carries with itself a

nourishing warmth, that cherishes all things, bestowing life and movement. Fifthly, while it is present and within everything, it is spoiled by nothing and mixed with nothing.

Ficino is taking us step by step. He is the rare mystic who values organization. He develops his theme and we continue quoting.

Likewise goodness itself stands above the whole order of things, is spread very quickly, and caresses and attracts everything. It forces noting; like heat, it emanates love as its companion everywhere, by which every single thing is enticed from every direction and willingly admits of its goodness. Penetrating into the innermost parts of things, it mixes with none of them. Finally, just as goodness itself is inestimable and ineffable, so assuredly is light.

Ficino was a singer of Orphic hymns. This was a well-known fact about him, and yet we have no texts for these hymns, with the exception of the opening of Chapter Six and a few letters. Ficino tells us he is quoting straight from the hymns of Orpheus. We repeat these words, though wondering how this short text could possibly be set to music.

The Sun is the eternal eye seeing all things, the pre-eminent celestial light, moderating heavenly and worldly things, leading or drawing the harmonious course of the world, the Lord of the world, immortal Jupiter, the eye of the world circling round everywhere, possessing the original imprint in whose image all worldly

forms are made. The Moon is pregnant with the stars, the Moon is queen of the stars.

Ficino cannot stay away from the ancient Egyptians. About fifty words after his Orphic quote, he neatly brings Iamblichus into his discussion to provide a winged flight to Egypt. The true Hermetic imagination can quickly travel anywhere. We quote, still in Chapter Six.

Iamblichus states the opinion of the Egyptians in the following way: Whatever good we have we get from the Sun, that is, either from itself alone, or from another agency as well, in other words either directly from the Sun or from the Sun through other things. Likewise the Sun is the lord of all elemental virtues. The Moon by virtue of the Sun is the lady of generation.

Ficino's finest writing takes place throughout this sixth chapter. He is able to flow from source to source without a touch of pedantry. His prose shines. Let us provide an extended example.

But let us return to the ancients. The old physicians called the Sun the heart of heaven. Heraclitus called it the fountain of celestial light. Most Platonists located the world-soul in the Sun, which, filling the whole sphere of the Sun, poured out through that fiery-like globe just as it poured out spirit-like rays through the heart, and from these through everything, to which it distributed life, feeling and motion universally. For these reasons, perhaps, most astrologers think that just as God alone gave us an intellectual soul so he alone sends it to us under

the influence of the Sun; that is, only in the fourth month after conception.

When Ficino mentions the fourth month, he indicates his intention to be specific. His astrology would neither have upheld nor uplifted so many readers without his persistent specificity. We continue the quotation without interruption. We are bringing a minor work back to life.

But this is something that concerns them. On the other hand there is no doubt that Mercury, which signifies the movement of our mind, moves the least far from the Sun. Saturn, signifying the state of the separated mind, departs least from the ecliptic. Moreover Jupiter and Mars—the former through Sagittarius and the latter through Aries—are concordant with the Apollonian Lion, and have obtained their respective gifts: Jupiter signifying religious justice, civil laws and prosperity, and Mars magnanimity, fortitude and victory. The Moon, Venus and Mercury are called the companions of the Sun; the Moon because of its frequent conjunction with the Sun, Venus and Mercury because they do not stray beyond the vicinity of the Sun, on account of their advancing in step with it. Hence they have received the rulership of universal generation.

Many passages in *The Book of the Sun* show similar specifics in bringing astral powers down to earth. Ficino might do this better than anyone else, in any era, but his intense spiritual astrology makes him unique, and he never expresses it better than in several sustained prose rhapsodies contained in this work.

The long concluding paragraph to Chapter Eleven is a splendid example, and shows Ficino as an ardent, eloquent Neoplatonist. In the next chapter, he explicates the similarity of the Sun to the Divine Trinity, and compares the nine muses to the nine planetary bodies. He is Petrarch and Pythagoras. He has never written a more heightened prose. He is always reverent. His final chapters, eleven through thirteen, show him moving from his beloved Plato to James the Apostle. Ficino often seems one half step away from the inquisitor's arm. We close this chapter by quoting Ficino's closing with James.

James prudently reminded us that this Sun is not the beginning of the universe ... I shall briefly review here James's arguments.

Since stillness, as the first principle and end of movement is the most perfect of all movements, God, beginning and regulator of everything, cannot himself be in movement. The Sun is in motion every day. Moreover the power of the first principle, being immense, touches everything with its power and it cannot be restrained in any way ... The Sun is only a small part of the world; it is contained within a narrow space, it is pulled around from its sphere, it is always carried backwards from the sphere above against the motion of its own sphere, it is obstructed by contrary signs and adverse stars, and, if I may speak thus, weakened by aspects of the malefics. Lastly the first principle of the universe operates everywhere always, everywhere and in everything.

Ficino is making his final statements about the relative powers about the Sun and the Creator of the Sun. By staying with James, he is not likely to confuse the two. We continue our long quotation to Chapter Thirteen's conclusion.

The Sun on the other hand does not create the globes of the cosmos, nor can it effect whatever is cold or moist or dense, or similar things through its own power. Nor if there are similar powers in the heavens, do they derive their origin from the Sun. Moreover, although the Sun is exceedingly far removed from the Creator of the world, nevertheless all appear by divine law to lead back to the one Sun, the Lord and regulator of the heavens. And we are made fully aware from this that things which are in heaven, and under heaven, and above heaven, are similarly referred back to the one beginning of all things. And finally considering that, let us worship this one first principle with that same ritual observance that all celestial things give to the Sun.

Chapter Nine:

Ficino—Five Questions on the Mind

In 1476, two years after Ficino completed his monumental *Platonic Theology*, he had a sudden inspiration which resulted in a brief self-contained essay, “Five Questions Concerning the Mind.” He addresses his fellow philosophers, no doubt his colleagues and friends in his academy outside Florence. He takes himself back to ancient Greece with references to Jove and Pallas. He is “the companion of Minerva.” He is off and running.

It could be said Ficino is seldom far from ancient Athens but this essay is special, a cherished rarity in Ficino’s works, for he shows his early scholastic training; he uses the rigid, logical Aristotelian method to convey Platonic thought. Strong declarative sentences are filled with abstract nouns and often hold the quality of aphorisms. The sentences come together to form interlocking parts, which form paragraphs that come together to form more interlocking parts. Plato’s mystical truths are explicated by a seemingly endless series of geometric theorems. Ficino does not waste a phrase, unlike his usual poetic rhapsodies that attempt to define Platonic teachings. If

Aristotle had prepared a detailed lecture on basic Plato, his careful words would have taken this form.

Ficino opens like a modern journalist. His essay is about five questions and his opening paragraph states those questions. Kind words to his colleagues follow. He is not humble, for he asks the eternal probing questions of his age, succeeding to Shakespeare's age, perhaps any age.

First, is the mind's motion directed toward a definite end;

Second, is the end of the mind: motion more motion, hence ceaseless motion, or rest;

Third, is this end result particular or universal;

Fourth will the mind ever attain its desired end; and,

Fifth, if the mind obtains this desired end, will it ever lose it?

Ficino talks of mind but his subject, as so often, is the human soul. His conception of soul requires this eternal human entity to possess interior parts. Hence Ficino's soul is divisible like his cosmos is divisible—he might be lost without that term—and the microcosm-macrocosm comes swiftly into play. Next Ficino needs to make specific divisions of life forms: angels, humans, beasts. Not surprisingly, the angels can also be divided, with Thrones the lowest angel and therefore closest to the human mind. The beasts are, of course, lower than humans and lack the precious human gift of free will. This strong emphasis on free will shows the strong scholastic influence of Aquinas, where Ficino's higher education started. Now he writes short, succinct, rigorously logical sentences, like Aquinas who felt the strong influence of Aristotle.

Style matters in this Ficino essay. The sentences might read slowly but they never stop moving. The reader will never be halted by a misuse or poor choice of words—clarity is all. If this essay would influence later poets, the constant momentum of the irresistible pressure of abstract prose filled with mystical content would be the primary attraction. The reader is constantly driven forward by the next philosophical explication, always building on ones that had come previously. If prose can do this, so can carefully wrought verse.

Ficino provides beasts with very limited capacities. He never mentions a specific animal—he is rather lacking Aristotle's interest in biology—but each beast has a particular end which it moves to by instinct. Rather vague and not very interesting. Ficino does mention spiders with no efforts at classification, though they must be the lowliest of beasts, a long way from angels. Ficino notes that spiders spin webs, a complex skill accomplished entirely by instinct. The spiders receive no training. They have no will. They spin webs, ceaselessly, tirelessly, because that's what spiders do. This interests Ficino, a rare moment away from mysticism and cosmology. He is somewhat amazed that spiders never improve in their weaving; they start as masters of their strange art and never improve, not even slightly. Ficino obviously spent some time away from his books while looking at spiders, a rare instance of his sustained observation of nature. Ficino could have completed his essay without the spiders, but he had watched them and wanted to get them in. If he had ever seen an angel, even a lower-class one, he might have gone on for pages.

Unlike spiders, humans have minds and intellects, which seem interchangeable terms in Ficino. Combine mind with free will and the human person can make consecutive, correct

decisions about his soul. The terms are complicated and often seem to run into each other. Otherwise we would not pay so much attention to Ficino's style in these matters. Clearly the beasts cannot rise above beasts and, perhaps strangely, the angels, no matter what ranking, cannot rise or fall below being angels. Ficino gives no evidence that angels can change rank.

With beasts and angels firmly in place, eternally in place, all the movement, growth, and action occurs to the human soul, the central station of the cosmos, and each soul shall be guided by free will, unavailable to beasts or angels, to use mind or intellect to make careful, virtuous choices. Free will requires never-ending choices. The life of the soul shall never be easy but it is unlikely to be dull.

But in all this steadfast activity, the five questions Ficino first posed are getting solidly answered. Yes, in Platonic terms, the soul has an ultimate or definite end, which is the Blessed or God. In an accompanying Christian belief system, these terms refer to God. The soul, if consistently virtuous, will come to rest in God or the Platonic Good. Of course this is the soul's desired end, though not reached without considerable patience and difficulty—and of course this end is everlasting. The answers to the five questions do not seem all that difficult when simply answered, one after the other. Ficino's problem is setting up the cosmic structure, vast and endless, where the soul can move about, ever so slowly—rather like Ficino's prose—but unremittingly toward the Good.

It would all be so simple if the soul did not have passions outside the intellect or mind, passions that can lower the human to beastly or sinful behavior, thereby significantly lowering his place in the cosmos, falling far below the lowest rank of angels, perhaps temporarily trapped in a complex

spider's web with a fierce determination toward virtue the only way out. This starts the soul's movement, always movement, a quality all good poetry must maintain, a trait Ficino slowly but surely sustains in prose, this one time, his return to the Schoolmen, with souls always edging upward and outward, the eternal quest, a subject fit for dramatic verse, with a conclusion that never stops bringing rewards.

Chapter Ten:

Ficino's Greatest Work: His Collected Letters

This chapter will be the longest. Ficino's letters require that. Better one long chapter than break the topic down into several small ones that take away from the unity of the subject. Ficino's letters are unlike anything else he wrote. Though he addressed each letter to an individual recipient, sometimes two, he had every intention these epistles would be published. He was an old man in 1495 when twelve volumes of his letters were indeed published. So these short works were meant for a wide audience—the recipients surely knew this—and Ficino was a prolific writer of letters.

Occasionally a letter was a public address to a public figure, like Ficino's three long letters to Pope Sixtus IV. No evidence exists Pope Sixtus ever answered these letters, but Ficino was not shy about publishing them soon after he composed them. Its other recipients, his close personal friends, were given a much longer period of grace, but they had to know Ficino was not writing for their eyes alone.

It was once said of Voltaire: he never had an unpublished thought. This unkind exaggeration bears some

truth, and might also be said for Ficino, especially when considering the copious number of his letters. They cover the wide range of his ever-expanding thought, and they are expressed with a remarkable consistency of style and tone. The style remains so similar that Ficino might almost be suspected of composing all his letters on one grand occasion, lasting hundreds of hours.

But of course this never happened, and yet the style and tone are one of the great wonders of the Ficino letters, for Ficino never wrote this way before. That is our primary motivation for holding all the Ficino letters together in one chapter. They simply do not fit in anywhere with the rest of his canon. Each sentence in each letter gives the appearance of slow careful forming, rigid precise shaping, carved in marble, hammered in stone. The reader's eyes do not flow through a paragraph—and these are often long paragraphs—but must move slowly, all too slowly, from one sentence to another. These letters are not an easy read, and yet no where else does Ficino express his complex philosophical concepts with such precise, exquisite clarity. This is why our generous quotations work well in a single chapter. Perhaps philosophy was truly meant to be written this way. The reader gleans a glowing kernel of wisdom, carefully absorbs this sunlike particle, and carefully moves on to the next shining nugget, directly relating to the preceding and leading to the next. What we are talking about are beautifully-formed paragraphs. No law exists in literature that states writing has to read quickly. Ficino certainly would not have thought so. Modern teachers of freshman composition have searched high and low for exemplary models of paragraph construction. In the letters of Ficino, they have found their man.

In Ficino's multi-volumed *Platonic Theology*, usually considered his masterpiece, his sentences gracefully, smoothly flow into each other, with a certain irresistible inevitability. This helps explain the great, enduring popularity of the work. His other works and many translations are similar in style. They are a reader's delight, and held multitudes of readers till the Victorian Age—and then the letters, so very different, almost as if from another hand. Ficino's beliefs and ideas do not change in the letters. It is important we keep this firmly in mind. It is his manner of writing that undergoes such a startling transformation. He shows traces of essayist Francis Bacon, who was often more interested in the rhythmic structure of his prose than its contents, and sometimes traces of Polonius, the elderly character in *Hamlet* who never tires of providing advice to young people. These are the negatives of Ficino's epistolary style. But the positives are grand, for no where else does Ficino come so close to his master Plato, who also makes the single sentence into an art form, and who never sets down a sentence without having something vital to say.

The Ficino letters covered in this chapter were written between 1457 and 1481. We are using an addition of *Selected Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, published by Inner Traditions International, Rochester, Vermont, 1996. Their text comes from *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, a complete text, published by Shepheard-Walwyn, London, 1975.

In our own Ficino chapter, we quote from Inner Traditions because we prefer their team of translators from the original Latin to English: Latin members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science, London. These translators are not provided individual names, but they do excellent work. We could not be so certain in our comments

about Ficino's style without them. Inner Traditions has divided their collection of Ficino letters into ten sections by subject, and we find that division useful and will follow it. Hence we give full credit to Inner Traditions for our chapter divisions. Each letter we quote will be identified twice; by Inner Traditions by a number, then by Shepheard-Walwyn by two numbers, the original volume and letter number within that volume. Bibliographical information is often tucked away at the back of a scholarly book in tiny print because the author finds it insignificant. We do not believe our bibliographical data to be unimportant.

Inner Traditions devotes its first section of Ficino's letters to Truth and Virtue. Obviously these two virtues will overlap with letters in other sections, unavoidable with such a versatile intellect as Ficino, but our editors have provided a valuable service and we will follow through.

Correspondences was a foundation of Ficino's thought, and he makes an extended comparison between Body and Soul in a public letter dedicated to his friends in Florence (2) (4.51). This letter was obviously meant for immediate public consumption. Ficino had many friends in Florence. He was always a popular man. We know from previous readings in Ficino that he believed the Spirit connected the Body and Soul. He often worked in threes. The Trinity of his Catholic Church was very comfortable to him. We now provide our first extended quote, the format of this chapter.

Now, in order to reflect more easily upon the divine aspect of the mind from the corresponding likeness of the beautiful body, refer each aspect of the body to an aspect of the mind. For the body is the shadow of the soul; the form of the

body, as best it can, represents the form of the soul; thus liveliness and acuteness of perception in the body represent, in a measure, the wisdom and far-sightedness of the mind; strength of body represents strength of mind; health of body, which consists in the tempering of the humors, signifies a temperate mind. Beauty, which is determined by the proportions of the body and a becoming complexion, shows us the harmony and splendor of justice; also, size shows us liberality and nobility; and stature, magnanimity; in the same way dexterity indicates to us civility and courteousness; fine speaking, oratory; sweet singing, the power of poetry. Finally, gracious laughter represents serene happiness and perfect joy, which Virtue herself showers upon us.

So far Ficino's Soul is more about behavior patterns than ultimate divine connections, but he shall get to that. He is only now preparing the way. His mention of "tempering of the humors" is worth noting. Ficino of course was a physician. His healing beliefs still genuflected at the name Galen, the great name in medicine from the ancient world who insisted a steady balance of the body's four humors should be maintained. Scholarly books have been written about the four humors and their widespread influence over the centuries. The evidence from Ficino's letters is he took the humors quite seriously, but more importantly, he was a great eclectic as a physician, as he was in all his undertakings. That is what makes his letters such a treasure trove of early Renaissance belief systems—Ficino knelt down before so many—and why his letters deserve ample quotation.

In the Truth and Virtue section, Ficino writes several short personal letters advocating Patience. We will quote from one he sent to his nephew Sebastiano Salvini (8) (4.12). Ficino's use of gold in the passage might not make a modern leap to thoughts of alchemy. But his nephew was a young man learning the ropes of Renaissance Florence—gold meant alchemy, and alchemy meant he better sit up and pay attention.

O, the marvelous power of patience! The other virtues certainly battle against fate in one way or another, but it is patience alone, or patience more than all the others, that conquers fate; for patience, being in accord with the will of divine providence, changes what fate has decreed to be immutable and unavoidable, so that it makes the unavoidable voluntary. Just as he who acts badly turns what is good for him into evil, so he who suffers well turns what is bad for him into good. Certainly, in suffering ills, such a man ultimately becomes good. He is tested and made bright by adversity, as gold is tried by fire; and as a veteran soldier is made wily and dauntless by frequent experience of danger, so he who has first tasted bitterness appreciates sweet experiences all the more keenly, puts them to wiser use, and enjoys them with greater pleasure. The man who has not experienced evil cannot rightly appraise, while he who has never learned to make use of evil will never know how to enjoy the good.

Ficino tells his nephew about Patience, and so much else. His theory of turning evil into good, and sadly the

opposite, is a firm foundation of his belief system. This manipulation of abstract terms will become far more intense when Ficino tells us what he actually means by the good. For people who either experienced or read about the horrific suffering in the twentieth century, Ficino's formula about patience overcoming suffering seems far too neat, tidy, trite. Patience really is not a good working solution for the prisoner at Dachau or the Gulag.

Yet Ficino might have a strong response to that. He lived only a century after the bubonic plague that wiped out close to forty percent of western Europe's population. Ficino might have felt quite lucky he was born. He witnessed the brutal wars between city-states on his own Italian peninsula. Bodies, soldiers and civilians, women and children, slowly bleeding to death would not have been an unknown sight to him. The twentieth century does not hold a monopoly on massive suffering. That Ficino avoided writing about violence does not mean he was unaware. He could not have been a physician without watching people in excruciating pain die. So perhaps Patience was all he meant it to be. The practice of any virtue has to be better than all-out despair. Regardless of the desolation around him, Ficino would remain the eternal optimist, and is that not what true Patience is all about?

In another letter that must have been soon meant for public consumption, Ficino takes the allegorical form of truth in addressing Cardinal Riario on the education of a ruler (5) (4.27). This letter is long enough to be a treatise. If Cardinal Riario did not require eyeglasses when he began reading, he might have needed help from strong lenses when he finished. Ficino provides several hundred pieces of advice in several hundred sentences. He had to have Plato's *Republic* in mind,

but Plato was not this forbearing or succinct. The good cardinal cannot really afford to miss a sentence. A short quote will be sufficient this time. If any of our readers someday find themselves in charge of an Italian city-state, they might want to read the entire letter.

Let your mind be at once humble and exalted, a blend of dignity and courtesy; may you live temperately and speak truthfully, but sparingly. May you be generous in giving but not rash in promising. May you be firm in faith, your vision wide. May your judgments stand the test of time, following carefully the words of the wise. Lest many men should find it easy to deceive you everyday, do not trust many and do not trust easily.

Yes, this sound like Polonius, but Polonius did not talk for three thousand lines. He probably could have, but Shakespeare did have a sense of humor.

Ficino is again writing to his obviously well-informed nephew, Sebastiano Salvani, in the final letter of the Truth and Virtue section. Ficino focuses on Truth, and makes solid connections with the Logos at the opening of John's Gospel. The Logos is the Word and thereby transcends all human conceptions of time. Ficino is again making connections or correspondences—always that, the ultimate practice of being a white magus, a forerunner of all the Renaissance magicians to follow. He could do this and avoid problems with his Catholic Church, because his connections often kept him on holy Christian ground. If he wants to define Truth, he could not do better than seek divine connections with the ultimate source of the divine. Ficino's language, with so many repetitions and

abstractions, can be difficult to follow, and his nephew might have read the letter more than once.

Truth is such that it can never be other than itself. Consequently, truth is eternally present and neither passes from the past into the present nor flows from the present into the future. Truth is so present that the truth even of the future and of the past is present. For by that same truth by which it was true from the beginning of time that this or that would at some time be, and by which it will be true for all time to come that this or that once was, it is true in the present that this or that is, or will be.

Ficino repeats all of this information again, just in case his nephew did not get it the first time, always possible, and then ever so gradually moves on to his next metaphysical point—that truth is eternal time, and such truth is unmoving. Ficino means far more by unmoving than a stubborn man or a giant rock difficult to push. Back to his text:

And even if truth should be thought ever to cease, then it would be true for all time, yet only through truth itself would it be true, that truth once was. If truth is unmoving in movement, if it is present in past and future, if it is in the beginning without a beginning, if likewise in the end without an end, it is certainly nothing other than the eternal unmoving itself.

The mind therefore, with its natural capacity for truth, partakes of this eternal unmoving. This will, also by its nature longing for truth, can be granted its desire beyond

movement and time. Only a life dedicated by choice to the study and cultivation of truth is lived in the fullness of bliss beyond movement and beyond time.

This should keep the nephew busy, no doubt the uncle's intent, as we move to Section Two of *Selected Letters*, titled Human Nature. A letter to Giovanni Cavalcanti, a poet and Ficino's "unique friend," shows a personal side of the author. We can presume Calvalcanti smiled broadly at these several lines from Ficino (12) (4.6).

But let me be two, as in *Phaedrus* Plato would have us, or even three, as he argues in the *Timaeus*, as long as that within me draws me to honorable labor always overcomes that which draws me back to indolence and torpor. See, that which stirs me to action and speech is now dominant, and so I am speaking and acting as best I can. But somehow we are now faced with another problem. For I would like to joke for a while in my usual way and to write something humorous at least to my Cavalcanti. I took up my pen chiefly with this intention, yet I am writing rather seriously; while attempting the lyrical or comic, I am producing elegy or tragedy.

If we could time travel, we would send this passage to Ficino's nephew. He could use an unwinding, a smile. We chose this quote because Ficino so rarely shows his close-up personal side in his letters. If not there, then where to look? Angela Voss insists he laughed and joked, but we find precious little evidence.

In another letter to Cardinal Riario, with the correspondent Archbishop Salviati of Pisa, Ficino writes an interesting passage about evil's power to deceive. Curiously Ficino does not personify evil into an oversized, cartoon-like satanic figure or an intimidating, wildly exaggerated, allegorical monster. His vibrant, cunning abstraction of evil is far more frightening, far more profound, a sad fact of human nature. Ficino was not shy at offering counsel to clerics high above him, nor would he have expected this letter to stay out of public hands for long (16) (4.34).

Therefore to prosper from prosperity, let us remember that the nature of evil is to offer itself to us daily under the guise of good, that is, pleasure, a snare to deceive and destroy the wretched. As for evil itself, especially corruption of the mind, should it ever come to us undisguised, being even more ugly than ugliness itself, it would be promptly shunned. But when it comes to us covered by pleasure, the image of the good itself, it is very easily taken in by anyone given lodging as if it were the good; but soon after, it secretly strikes down its unwary host with a sword, as he deserves.

The final lecture on the section Human Nature shows Ficino struggling to understand the folly and misery of men. This subject is never far from him. He addresses this letter to three friends (20) (1.58). Hence it might have taken a little time to become public.

Ficino begins by describing a painting in his own academy. He was fond of this painting, for he used its imagery in other letters. The painting shows a sphere of the world—

Ficino's taste in art would turn to the cosmic. We quote his description, "on one side Democritus laughing, and on the other Heraclitus weeping. Why is Democritus laughing? Why does Heraclitus weep? Because the mass of mankind is a monstrous, mad, and miserable animal."

This type of extreme statement requires an explanation, and Ficino knew that. He immediately moved into a long paragraph that explicated the profound, unending difficulties of the Human Condition: the constant struggle between body and soul, between sense and reason. The dualist battle is all. Zoroaster would be quietly pleased. Ficino's style is Baconian with a strong emphasis on balanced sentences.

Mortal men ask God for good things everyday, but they never pray that they make good use of them. They want fortune to wait upon their desires, but they are not concerned that desire should wait upon reason. They would like all their household furniture down to the least article to be made as beautiful as possible but they are hardly ever concerned that the soul should become beautiful. They diligently seek out remedies for bodily diseases, but neglect the diseases of the soul. They think they can be at peace with others, yet they continually wage war with themselves. For there is a constant battle between body and soul, between the senses and reason. They believe that they can find themselves a faithful friend in others, but not one of them keeps faith with himself. What they have praised, they neglect; what they have desired, they do not want; and contrariwise. They lay out

parts of buildings to a measure, and tune strings on a lyre to a hair's breadth, but they never attempt to harmonize the parts and movements of the soul. They make stones into the likeness of living men, and they make living men into stones; they despise wise men themselves, but they honor the statues and names of the wise. They claim to know about everyone else's affairs, although they do not know their own.

Ficino's three friends perusing this letter might have paused over the passage about making, "living men into statues." This is a hint of Ficino's famous god-making passage, when his translation of *Asclepius* explained how to introduce gods into statues. But this requires the supernal powers of ancient Egypt, an ultimate source of Ficino's magical beliefs but absent in this letter. Yet Ficino remains interested in statues, always that, and he still associates the adjective "living" with them. He might never have looked at a statue and expected it to stand perfectly still.

We move now to Section Three in our volume of *Selected Letters*, with the category, the Soul. This might be the topic that most concerned Ficino during his long career. His multi-volume *Platonic Theology* has the alternative title, *The Immortality of the Soul*. In his first letter of this Section Three, Ficino briefly defines soul as, "an incorporeal rational substance fitted to direct the body" (22 (1.96). In other works, Ficino emphasizes how the soul and the body required a third part—the spirit—to communicate. As we know, Ficino never tired of working in threes, founded on the Trinity. But he is also a philosopher with a strong bent towards dualism, as we noted in

our last, long quotation with all those neatly balanced phrases, truly models of a dualistic style.

Ficino can also write this way about the soul. Hence his nature of the soul can sometimes be divided into threes, at other times in twos. He quotes his beloved Plato with explications of the same threes and twos. Why the inconsistency, or is there one? Ficino would not think so. When writing about the soul, his subject is the most fluent and flowing of entities. Hence one strictly human, mundane set of numbers cannot possibly hold it in, nor confine Ficino's ever expanding imagination, which took direct inspiration from his translation of the Hermetic books, also known for inconsistencies in cosmic structure and yet held together by an intense steadfast piety. Thrice-Great Hermes was indeed a holy man, and Ficino would have expected no less of himself. His concept of soul cannot be confined by numeric or geometric structures. The soul is far too grand and holy, not to mention immortal, for that. But imposing a limited human structure on the soul can attain needed, useful insight, and when Ficino places the soul in a dualist structure, he is doing just that.

We could quote bits and pieces from Ficino's letters on the soul in Section Three. Instead we have chosen another long, extended passage to show Ficino stating, working out, and elaborating his dualistic concept on the soul. He does add a "nature midway" early in our passage, which does add a three to an otherwise abundance of twos. This is not math but mysticism. Pythagoras would have agreed. Inserting "nature midway" is not an inconsistency or error, though it stands alone. It is a fine example of a mystic's fluent, vibrant cosmos, this time dualistic.

Our chapter on Ficino's astrology shows his efforts at working with the three-part human structure: soul, spirit, body.

Alchemical imagery briefly enters our Section Three passage. What matters is Ficino connects the two previous metals, gold and silver, with appropriate planets. This means Ficino is taking his alchemy very seriously. His many, minor references to this occult art would prove influential for the next two centuries. He addressed this letter to one friend, but the content would have so many readers (23) (1:107).

We are all agreed that the reasonable soul is set on a horizon, that is the line dividing the eternal and temporal, because it has a nature midway between the two. Being in the middle, this nature is not only capable of rational power and action, which lead up to the eternal, but also of energies and activities that descent to the temporal. Since these divergent tendencies spring from opposing natures, we see the soul turning at one moment to the eternal and at another to the temporal and so we understand rightly that it partakes of the nature of both. Our Plato placed the higher part of the soul under the authority of Saturn, that is, in the realm of mind and divine providence, and the lower part under Jupiter, in the realm of life and fate. Because of this the soul seems to have a double aspect, one of gold and one of silver. The former looks toward the Saturnine and the latter to the Jovial. It is better to love eternal things than to judge them, for they are very difficult to judge rightly but they can never be wrongly loved. They can never be loved too much; indeed they cannot be loved enough until they are loved passionately. But it is better to judge temporal things than to desire them. Usually they are

judged well enough, but basely loved. A judge takes within himself the form of the object being judged, whereas the lover transports himself into the form of the beloved. It is better to raise to ourselves inferior things by judging them, than to cast ourselves down through loving them. It is better to raise ourselves to higher things through love than to reduce them to our level through judgment.

Above all, this long passage is about movement. That might explain Ficino’s “nature midway,” his cosmic pathway for so much human and supernal traveling. Ficino’s soul is constantly moving back and forth between two extremes, the eternal battle, with eternal rest in God the only solution.

Ficino is that rare mystic to write clearly. Perhaps other mystics or opaque philosophers should have written letters to their friends. Perhaps they should have had friends. Whatever.

We have included Ficino’s metaphysical beliefs on love because this is his core value—St. Paul’s epistle on charity comes to mind—and will appear again, other sections, other formulations, other letters. Paul describes charity as already occurred, a distinct and past happening meant to endure.

With Ficino, love is always in the process of happening. His language works that way. Yes, the lover becomes a metaphysical unity with his beloved, and so he “transports himself.” This requires action, movement, activity. St. Paul’s message might have been too easy for Ficino. Ficino’s approach to love inspired countless sonnets, St. Paul nary a one.

Ficino has more valuable advice to give in this same letter. With only a paragraph break and the word “Farewell” for

separation, he makes the sudden, abrupt shift from the soul's complex dualism to the value of historical writing. But this shift would not have surprised his recipient, Jacopo Bracciolini, who wrote history. Hence Ficino's pearls of wisdom had a nice personal touch, always pleasant to encounter in Ficino's letters. His admirable clarity surely was aided by the kindly friends he wrote for.

But before I draw to a close I beg you, my Bracciolini, not to lose your enthusiasm for writing history, now that you have begun. For historians praise the style of your prose and the subject is very necessary for the life of mankind, not only to make it more agreeable but to found it upon tradition. What is in itself mortal, through history attains immortality; what is absent becomes present, what is ancient becomes new. A young man quickly matches the full development of the old; and if an old man of seventy is considered wise because of his experience of life, how much wiser is he who covers a span of a thousand or three thousand years. For each man seems to have lived for as many thousands of years as the span of history he has studied.

Once more, farewell.

Ficino could not talk about history without adding a metaphysical concept. We should note Ficino was not living in an age of great historians. The last writer to fit that description might have been Herodotus. Other candidates come to mind, but Ficino was surely far ahead of his time. Today if you shake an academic tree, several historians will quickly fall out. Ficino's

advice to historians would not have seemed trite in his own age. He liked looking backwards. He spent a large part of his life doing that. Dante was a modern author. Ficino was bound to like and encourage historians. If he had an extra life, he might have been one.

Ficino writes another letter, a long letter, truly a theological tract, to his unique friend and poet Giovanni Calvalcanti. The letter reflects on different aspects of the soul for 1,500 words. He is recounting a discussion with two excellent citizens and lawyers. He started with the loving style of friendship but now must turn serious. Plato often starts a dialogue in this slow, rambling style, so we should not be surprised Ficino tries this. Again like Plato, when the main content commences, he is never more serious. Ficino writes at great length on the mind, intellect, and imagination, and a Ficino scholar would want to read the entire letter. Surely Cavalcanti did.

We are quoting the extended section where Ficino gives his finest explication of the Platonic Forms (25) (1.39). Ficino does not mention Christ, but he does place the Forms in what could be called a Christian context. We might often forget Ficino was a priest, but he was unlikely to. His God of the Forms is again similar to the Logos at the start of John's Gospel. Ficino does not mention John, but he does not have to, for he often makes similar statements about the divine mind, light, and power. It was Ficino's special genius that he could connect all this inextricably to all he knew of the Platonic Forms. Christ and Plato—Ficino was the ultimate spiritual magus and that required finding convincing spiritual correspondences, metaphysical unities that are not likely to

come apart, Christ and Plato, with a strong touch of Thrice-Great Hermes.

When in sleep the workings and movement of the external senses cease, then the imagination, which is fed by the rest of the senses, gathers so much strength that it paints pictures internally, which seem to represent what is real. What therefore will the intellect, which is so much more powerful than the imagination, do when it has escaped free from impediments to a far greater extent than the imagination of the dreaming man, and in pure truth and reason, perceives the true principles of everything? Certainly it will then depict within itself with the greatest precision all that is true; or rather, it will receive the image of all that is true from everywhere.

Ficino has now entered the metaphysical territory of Logos. The Forms will come. We are still in the midpoint of a long paragraph. Calvalcanti needs to catch his breath. Ficino did not write short paragraphs about the ultimate subjects. He moves on with a short, pointed question.

But from where, chiefly? From the mind of minds, from the light of lights. How easily does this come about? Very easily. For because of a natural kinship between the two, visible light instantaneously illumines a transparent substance as soon as this substance becomes still and pure; such light give this substance its own form, through which it gives the forms of all things visible.

Hermes Trismegistus would have strongly agreed with the easiness of the process and all the emphasis on light and thought. Trismegistus was better at thinking quickly than deeply. That is but a partial explanation of his immense popularity. He did write clearly, succinctly, immersed in piety. Ficino is still on familiar grounds. But he has to surpass the ancient Egyptian if he is to approach John.

In the same way the intelligible—indeed more than intelligible—light that is God forms that transparent substance of the intellect as soon as that substance becomes still; I say it gives this substance its own form, that is the divine, and through this the forms of all things intelligible.

Ficino has at last finished his monumental paragraph, but we need to follow his all-encompassing thought to the letter's close, which means one more paragraph, half the length of the former. Ficino never wrote a more subtle or profound line than, "light that is God forms the transparent substance of the intellect." This is not material for brain surgeons but mystics. Ficino is stating, with a gentle softness, yet an irrevocable power, that humans and God are one. John also said this, as did Thrice-Great Hermes. Yet Ficino's statement holds originality from its stark simplicity—he could not have used fewer words. He could not have been more eloquent.

We move to the final paragraph, where Ficino deals with the afterlife, better than his mentor Plato, surely better than Trismegistus, perhaps never surpassed in pure abstract terms, though John and the Synoptics expounded the afterlife concept with far more words, including parables and direct statements from Christ. No one but Ficino has done it this simply.

And just as God has imparted His bounteous light, so immediately He imparts life-giving warmth and joy, thus bestowing life, free from death. And just as He has shed into physical matter light unmixed with darkness so He has shed light into the mind beyond any limit of time, by which it rises from the currents of time to the stillness of eternity. Moreover, He ever nourishes the mind with goodness, to its content. For God draws the desire of the mind to Himself by filling it with beauty, and by drawing desire to Himself, he fulfils it. Where there is good without evil there is fullness without surfeit, and through infinite goodness there arises infinite capacity. Thus infinite goodness and beauty, the source of innumerable forms of goodness and beauty, equally attract and fulfil the mind in eternity.

If Cavalcanti, or any reader, had concerns about the afterlife, Ficino should have provided conclusive answers. Plato might not seem so important with eternity beckoning.

We are still in Section Three of *Selected Letters*, titled The Soul. There will altogether be ten sections—Pythagoras would have liked that number—but no section this important to Ficino's overall thought system. Ficino was a healer, and wrote to his dominant patron Lorenzo de Medici about how the soul cannot be satisfied or healed by mortal things, for the soul in salvation always seeks the eternal. Ficino's final paragraph talks about a slow, step-by-step transformation of character, the only means for the soul's eternal healing. Ficino uses short, crisp

sentences, easy to follow and comprehend. He is Polonius with staccato rhythms (28) (2.62).

What therefore is to be done, so that we may be of good strength and good vigilance? Life for us should straightway be turned right round in the opposite direction. Those things which we have learned from the many should be unlearned; in having to learn which, we have up to now ignored our own selves. Those things left undone should be learned; the which having been ignored, we cannot know ourselves.

This might be starting to sound uncomfortably like a contemporary self-help book, and Ficino has not yet plunged the depths of his transformation paragraph. He also might not have considered the letter's recipient, Lorenzo the Magnificent, the most astute intellect he had ever encountered. The letter would eventually be published, perhaps when Lorenzo was still alive. Ficino might feel he was treading ever so carefully on eggs. In some instances, the recipients do especially matter. Ficino wants to show great concern for his patron's immortal soul, without ever talking down to the great man—not an easy thing to do. Yet a self-help book to the most powerful man in Florence, one of five major city-states on the Italian peninsula? This might not be a profound approach, but a wise one. Yet Ficino is not talking about a personality uplift but the immortal soul. We use fence-straddling. He might write short, quick sentences but he could never take this matter lightly. He would never set down instructions on a more important matter. The paragraph does get better.

What we neglect should be esteemed; what we esteem should be neglected. What we flee from,

should be borne; what we pursue should be fled. For us the smile of fortune should bring tears; and the tears of fortune should bring a smile. For by these means, the filth of the multitude will not defile us, nor will carelessness of immortal things harm us, nor desire for knowledge torment us. Weakness will not prostrate us, nor desire undo us. Neither will prosperous fortune ensnare us, nor adverse fortune slay us. But, insofar as we shall be cleansed, so shall we be serene; insofar as we shall be serene, so shall we shine. Then, for the first time, we shall go forth full of true beauty, when for the first time we are devoid of dreams.

We know nothing about the dreams of either Ficino or Lorenzo, but Ficino talked enough about dreams that he must have experienced them. His advice about fleeing from what we pursue does have a slight dreamlike quality. This vision also could come from the daoist strains of eastern religions, an interesting thought except Ficino had no possible connection with such matters. As an educated Florentine, he could have found India and China on a map, but not much more.

Ficino's letter to Michele Mercati, a beloved fellow philosopher, comes in a form the recipient would have appreciated: a 2,000 word philosophical dialogue between SOUL and GOD. This form is quite similar to the Hermetic dialogues where Pymander, the supreme being, talks with Tat, an interested student who asks useful, pertinent questions. Mercati would assuredly have recognized this. A century later, circa 1585, Giordano Bruno would read this Ficino dialogue, as well as Trismegistus, with great interest. So many passages

from Ficino's brilliant dialogue could be aptly quoted—and again the Ficino scholar will want to study the entire piece—but we are most impressed with GOD's definition of Himself. Not even Milton, for all his poetic genius, had God talk so effectively.

GOD: Why do you despise of finding your father, O foolish one? It is not difficult to find the place where I am; for in me are all things, out of me come all things and by me are all things sustained forever and everywhere. And with infinite power I expand through infinite space. Indeed no place can be found where I am not; this very "where" surely exists through me and is called "everywhere." Whatever anyone does anywhere, he does through my guidance and my light. There is no desiring anywhere, except for the good; there is no finding anywhere, except of the truth. I am all good; I am all truth. Seek my face and you shall live. But do not move in order to touch me, for I am stillness itself. Do not be drawn in many directions in order to take hold of me; I am unity itself. Stop the movement, unify diversity, and you will surely reach me, who long ago reached you.

Ficino's GOD is truly a Platonist, but so much more. The opening of John's Gospel has been expanded in as many infinite directions as it could possibly move. Infinite is the term that would have excited Bruno, who also conceived God in infinities built on infinities. No one ever made greater claims for God than Bruno, though these views clearly began in Ficino's Florence.

Ficino also had a surprising influence on Copernicus. The great Polish scientist was deeply impressed by the sun's sublime and magnificent status throughout the Hermetic writings. In the dialogue sent to Mercati, GOD explices the sun in the same transcendent manner as Trismegistus. If Copernicus had read our next quoted passage, his confidence in the sun's theological priority would gain added foundation.

GOD: What then is the light of the sun? It is the shadow of God. So what is God? God is the sun of the sun; the light of the sun is God in the physical world, and God is the light of the sun above the intelligences of the angels. My shadow is such, O soul, that it is the most beautiful of all physical things. What do you suppose is the nature of my light? If this is the glory of my shadow, how much greater is the glory of my light? Do you love the light everywhere above all else? Indeed, do you love the light alone? Love only me, O soul, alone the infinite light; love me, the light, boundlessly, I say; then you will shine and be infinitely delighted.

GOD's instructions require a response, and Ficino closes his dialogue with the SOUL's long, mystic answer, which we quote in full. Why? Because the SOUL's utterance might be as sublime, wonderful, and profound as sincere mystical writing is ever likely to get. Outside his letters, or in this case a dialogue, Ficino never reaches these heights. If a reader is not passionate about mystical writing, he might wish to pass over this quote. Otherwise he might wish to read very carefully.

SOUL: Oh wonder, surpassing wonder itself!
What strange fire consumes me now? What new

sun is this, and whence does it shine upon me? What is this spirit, so powerful and so sweet, which at this moment pierces and soothes my inmost heart? Whence does it come? It bites and licks, goads and tickles. What better sweetness is this? Who could think of it? This bitter sweetness melts me through and through and disembowels me. After this even the sweetest things seem bitter to me. What sweet bitterness it is which joins together my torn fragments, making me one again, by which even the most bitter is made sweet to me? How irresistible is this will? I cannot but desire the good itself. I may avoid or postpone anything else, but not this longing for the good. How freely chosen is this necessity; for if I want to avoid it, I shall try to do so only because I think the avoidance itself is good. Nothing is more freely chosen than the good; because of it I desire all things; no, rather it is good which I desire in all things everywhere, and desire in such a way that I do not even wish to be capable of not desiring it. Who would think it? How full of life is that death by which I die in myself but live in God, by which I die to the dead but live for life, and live by life and rejoice in joy! Oh pleasure beyond sense! Oh delight beyond mind! Oh joy beyond understanding! I am now out of my mind, but not mindless, because I am beyond mind. Again I am in a frenzy, all too great a frenzy; yet I do not fall to the ground: I am borne upward. Now I expand in every direction and overflow but am not

dispersed, because God, the unity of unities brings me to myself, because he makes me live with himself. Therefore now rejoice with me, all you whose rejoicing is God. My God has come to me, the God of the universe has embraced me. The God of gods even now enters my inmost being. Now indeed God himself nourishes me wholly, and he who created me recreates me. He who brought forth the soul, transforms it into angel, turns it into God. How shall I give thanks to you, O grace of graces? Teach me yourself. O grace of graces; I pray you teach me and be my guide. May that grace be to you which is your very self.

What is most striking about this lengthy quote is the constant movement of the SOUL's mind. The skilled variation of sentence lengths add to this ceaseless movement. Mysticism is shown to be active, dramatic, restless. Time-outs do not occur for the mystic seeking his God. The SOUL will unite with GOD, but he must keep moving to stay there. The mystic is constantly spinning himself around in every direction; he does this to himself, and in no way is a passive recipient of God's goodness.

In Ficino's lexicon, God and goodness are synonyms. This makes goodness far more powerful, infinitely powerful, than its Platonic Form; thus the Form's influence can be found in the synonym. The mystic spins himself in every direction for he knows God will always be there. For the mystic glowing in radiant happiness, faith must be boundless, and free will must always be complete.

We conclude our study of Section Three with Ficino returning to his division of the soul in three parts. His source is Plato's *Timaeus*, which he follows closely in his exposition. Ficino never mentions *Timaeus* contradicts his own division of soul. It is unlikely this thought would have occurred to him. We have talked enough about the fluidity and ranging complexity of Ficino's soul to repeat ourselves here.

A similar division of our soul is described in Plato's *Timaeus*. There he divides the soul into three powers, as into parts, whose natures are reason, passion and desire. He has appointed the power of reason to the head, queen, as it were, in the highest citadel, chiefly because the head more than anything else seems to exert itself in watching; and it is there that all the senses are most vigorous. Next, he has set the power of passion in the region of the heart, since it is in anger, boldness, and fear that this region is most agitated. Lastly, he has given the power of desire to the liver because its natural vigor lends itself both to the digestion of food and to the growth of bodily craving.

Plato's liver had a lot more activity than most people. Anatomy will remain important as we, at last, move on to Section Four of the *Selected Letters*, titled Music, Harmony, and Divine Frenzy. Music will be connected to the brain. Divine Frenzy is another term for the total mystical experience. Giordano Bruno would use a variation of this term, *Heroic Enthusiasms*, as the title for his sonnet cycle composed in 1585 in London.

Any study of Ficino and music must take careful note of the first chapter of D. P. Walker's *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*. Walker shows how Ficino considered music, that is song, the highest of all art forms, because its power meets no physical interference when moving through air—the term “Airy spirit” is used—into the listener's ear-canal and mind, all in one swift, fluent motion. No physical part of the human being gets in the way. To view a fine painting or sculpture, the entire complicated apparatus of the eye must function before the art work reaches the mind, and thereby a magical purity is lost. Ficino might be the only thinker in the Renaissance to make this distinction, but make it he did. He, of course, got the concept from Plato. Walker, in his long detailed study of many Renaissance maguses, never found one to talk of songs and “airy spirits.” Let us quote Ficino on the importance of music (31) (5.21).

But we have never found any gifted person who is not moved by the power of music. Furthermore, we have never known anyone who is not moved by music to have much penetration or judgment. There are two main reasons for this: one physical, the other mathematical. The physical reason is that the middle part of the ear, brain, to which the ear is closely connected, seems in some way to act as an instrument or stimulus to the faculty of judgment. But when this part of the brain is not in harmony, it does not respond at all to the universal harmony. On the other hand, when it is in harmony, it is wonderfully moved by the universal harmony as though by something totally similar. The mathematical reason, which the poets have

received from the astrologers, is that Mercury is the bestower of intelligence as well as the maker of the lyre.

It would be interesting to know exactly how Ficino kept all this in mind when he practiced medicine. In other letters he will stress the connection between music and healing. David playing the lyre for Saul was not metaphor for Ficino. If David played well, Saul would get better. Ficino understood this especially well because he was an accomplished lyre player. He sang Orphic hymns, the content of which we know almost nothing. Consequently any Orpheus mention in these collected letters will be set down. Let Ficino tell us about his musical performing (33) (1.92).

After my studies in theology and medicine, I often resort to the solemn sound of the lyre and to singing, to avoid other sensual pleasures entirely. I do it also to banish vexations of both soul and body, and to raise the mind to the highest considerations and to God as much as I may. This I do with the authority of Mercurius (Hermes Trismegistus) and Plato, who say that music was given to us by God to subdue the body, temper the mind, and render Him praise. I know that David and Pythagoras taught this above all else and I believe they put it into practice.

Of course no recordings exist of Ficino's music, but we can be certain his primary purpose was not popular entertainment. He might not have been outraged by popular recording groups of our era, but he surely would have been baffled. To what purpose? To what end? Ficino's music was yet

another form of prayer. He might have been too busy with his fingers for the intense concentration of mysticism. Music was rather for healing. In his letter to Francesco Musano, Ficino combines music, theology, and healing. He is at his philosophical best when combining (34) (1.5).

Do not be surprised, Francesco, that we combine medicine and the lyre with the study of theology. Since you are dedicated to philosophy, you must remember that within us nature has bonded body and spirit with the soul. The body is indeed healed by the remedies of medicine; but spirit, which is the airy vapor of our blood and the link between body and soul, is tempered and nourished by airy smells, by sounds, and by song. Finally, the soul, as it is divine, is purified by the divine mysteries of theology. In nature a union is made from soul, body, and spirit. To the Egyptian priests medicine, music, and the mysteries were one and the same study. Would that we could master this natural and Egyptian art as successfully as we tenaciously and wholeheartedly apply ourselves to it!

Egyptian is a reference to the Hermetic writings, the only source of Egyptian thought Ficino would have mastered. In the above quote, Ficino is giving Plato's knowledge to his Egyptians. This is a tight squeeze, but Ficino's towering opinion of Trismegistus might have prevented him from realizing this. He had connected Plato and Trismegistus so often in his own private thinking that he could not always make clear distinctions in his writing. In a treatise of almost three thousand words, printed in *Selected Letters* as number 35 (1.7), Ficino

states his firm belief that Trismegistus is not only the source of Plato but also Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Heraclitus. This confirms Frances Yates oft-repeated statement on the primacy of Trismegistus among Renaissance magical-spiritual belief systems. Trismegistus was so much wiser or inspired than Plato because he lived so long before him.

This long treatise is about divine frenzy, and with all respect to Trismegistus, Ficino cannot philosophize on this subject without deep involvement in Plato. The old Egyptian gets cast quietly aside. Divine frenzy cannot be explained in twenty-five words or less, but the starting point must be with memory, a special kind of human memory that originated with Plato's thought. Each soul in heaven before birth into a human body is filled with wondrous spiritual knowledge—all the joyous Platonic Forms are known—but the infant at birth begins a rapid process of forgetting a large portion of those heavenly splendors. This is not a hopeful thought, but Plato does not want his readers to bury their heads in despair. Each human possesses a powerful memory that, at times, once in a while, every so often, can recall traces of heavenly memory, and these chance recollections are the initial source of divine frenzy. Obviously some people are better than others at these recollections. Sustained recollections are especially welcome.

Plato was fond of forming divisions and categories—he had a sometimes annoying gift for this—and he applied this method to divine frenzy. If the recollections are strong and forceful enough, four kinds of divine frenzy can be expected: 1.) love, inspired by the planet Venus; 2.) poetry, inspired by the nine muses; 3.) understanding of Delphic mysteries and similar divine conundrums, inspired by Dionysius; 4.) prophecy, inspired by Apollo. Of course Ficino accepted this

list as gospel truth. It would not occur to him that parts of this list might be arbitrary or creative writing. That would be like doubting parts of John's Gospel. Ficino was a man of faith. He could not write a treatise of three thousand words if he did not believe. His divine philosopher is Plato, who believed souls in heaven feed on ambrosia and nectar. Plato never offers a third food, but then souls in heaven have so much to do. Let Ficino try explicating.

The minds of men, while they are there (heaven), are well nourished with perfect knowledge. But souls are depressed into bodies through thinking about and desiring earthly things. Then those who were previously fed on ambrosia and nectar, that is the perfect knowledge and bliss of God, in their descent are said to drink continuously of the river Lethe, that is forgetfulness of the divine. They do not fly back to heaven, whence they fell by weight of their earthly thoughts, until they begin to contemplate once more those divine natures that they have forgotten ...

But we do indeed perceive the reflection of divine beauty with our eyes and mark the resonance of divine harmony with our ears—those bodily senses that Plato considers the most perceptive of all. Thus when the soul has received through the physical senses those images that are within material objects, we remember what we know before when we existed outside the prison of the body. The soul is fired by this memory and, shaking its wings, by degrees purges itself from contact with the

body and its filth and becomes wholly possessed by divine frenzy.

Ficino, always the follower, cannot expand on divine frenzy without classifying. He has started this passage with two senses, eyes and ears, and he must see through those categories, without missing a line.

From the two senses I have just mentioned two kinds of frenzy are aroused. Regaining the memory of the true and divine beauty by the appearance of beauty that the eyes perceive, we desire the former with a secret and unutterable ardor of the mind. This Plato calls "divine love," which he defines as the desire to return again to the contemplation of divine beauty; a desire arising from the sight of its physical likeness. Moreover, it is necessary for him who is so moved not only to desire that supernal beauty but also wholly to delight in its appearance which is revealed to his eyes.

This quotation seems to contradict our D. P. Walker passage, but not if we move farther into Ficino's long treatise. When he analyses how the ears and music combine in divine frenzy, he far transcends what he analyzed on the eyes. With eyes, he seems to be following Plato closely on the dotted line. With the ears, he becomes, at times, his own person, his own philosopher, and the cosmic theories of musical harmony has never been better expressed.

But the soul receives the sweetest harmonies and numbers through the ears, and by these echoes is reminded and aroused to the divine music that may be heard by the more subtle and penetrating

sense of mind. According to the followers of Plato, divine music is twofold. One kind, they say, exists entirely in the eternal mind of God. The second is on the motions and order of the heavens, by which the heavenly spheres and their orbits make a marvelous harmony. In both of these our soul took part before it was imprisoned in our bodies. But it uses the ears as messengers, as though they were chinks in the darkness. By the ears, as I have already said, the soul receives the echoes of that incomparable music, by which it is led back to the deep and silent memory of the harmony that it previously enjoyed. The whole soul then kindles with desire to fly back to its rightful home, so that it may enjoy that true music again. It realizes that as long as it is enclosed in the dark abode of the body it can in no way reach that music. It therefore strives whole heartedly to imitate it, because it cannot here enjoy the possession. Now with men this imitation is twofold. Some imitate the celestial music by harmony of voice and the sounds of instruments, and these we call superficial and vulgar musicians. But some, who imitate the divine and heavenly harmony with deeper and sounder judgment, render a sense of its inner reason and knowledge into verse, feet, and numbers. It is these who, inspired by the divine spirit, give forth with full voice the most solemn and glorious song.

Ficino quotes from Orpheus in this treatise. Any hint of Ficino's frequent Orphic singing is a treasure, and so we provide his single reference to Orpheus in full.

The divine prophet Orpheus says, "Jove is first, Jove is last, Jove is the head, Jove is the center. The universe is born of Jove, Jove is the foundation of the earth and of the star-bearing heavens. Jove appears as man, yet he is the spotless bride. Jove is the breath and form of all things, Jove is the source of the ocean, Jove is the movement in the undying fire. Jove is the sun and moon, Jove, the king and prince of all. Hiding his light, he has shed it afresh from his blissful heart, manifesting his purpose."

So Orpheus has his share of eloquence, with content that nicely coincides with that famous opening of John's Gospel. It is difficult to image how Ficino might have set this passage to music, but the prose does contain slight subtle rhythms, if we listen hard enough.

We get some hints to this interesting problem in the closing paragraph in Section Four. We are moving slowly, but Ficino has never in his entire canon provided better content than these letters. If all we had of Ficino were the letters, we would have a full sense of his complete mastery.

Ficino ceaselessly looks back to antiquity, and this holds true for his personal ambitions to combine poetry and prose to enrich his philosophy. This often gets overlooked in any study of Ficino, but the man truly wanted to be a good writer, a solidly competent stylist. His model was always Plato, and yet he yearned to transcend his master. Plain facts: Plato was the greatest of philosophers, but Ficino was by far the better poet. If

only we had a few of his original Orphic lyrics. Let us grandly close out on Section Four (39) (2.3).

All antiquity, indeed, teaches us to combine poetry with philosophy. This was always done, particularly before Aristotle, mainly so that sacred mysteries of Minerva should be honored and loved by all and should be understood by the few who are indeed pure. We are taught the same thing by the Divinity itself which, rejoicing everywhere in poetic form, adorned the heavens with innumerable lights, as flowers in a meadow, and ordered the diverse orbits of the spheres so that, in perfect concert, they make a marvelous harmony and melody. Then, in the sublunar regions the same God, with a similar delight in poetry, arranged discordant forms of things into exquisite concord. Finally, in a variety of ways, he graced the earth, which seemed as though it would be the least beautiful of all creation, with the wonderful shapes and images of minerals and stones, plants and animals. He willed the very fruits of the earth to be covered with leaves and decorated with flowers. What more? He tempered both the individual and the universal with the numbers of music and the measures of poetry.

Ficino has once again provided a passage attempting to take in all creation and all meaning in an economy of words. His letters are filled with those miniature masterpieces of cosmic mysticism. His recipients were fortunate people, and presumably, slow readers.

We now move to Section Five of *Selected Letters*, titled Knowledge and Philosophy. Obviously overlap will occur between Section Five and other sections. For Ficino, knowledge is always a spiritual quest. To seek happiness in any non-spiritual venture is a one-way ticket to lasting misery. This has a trite sound, unusual for Ficino, but the interest lifts quickly by adding the wide-ranging, almost limitless, Hermetic imagination, the most useful and original contribution from Thrice-Great Hermes. Of course this all-powerful human imagination comes from God, is revealed by God, is spiritually linked to God. It can make for a happy person and some very promising poetry. Alchemical imagery proves helpful.

Know yourself, offspring of God in mortal clothing. I pray you, uncover yourself. Separate the soul from the body, reason from sensual desires; separate them as much as you can; and your ability depends on your endeavor. When the earthly grime has been removed you will at once see pure gold, and when the clouds have been dispersed, you will see the clear sky. Then, believe me, you will revere yourself as an eternal ray of the divine sun and, moreover, you will not venture to contemplate or undertake any base or worthless action in your own presence. Nothing at all can be hidden from God, through whom alone is revealed everything that is revealed. Northing of yours lies hidden from the mind, the everliving image of God who lives everywhere.

Ficino makes another brief, important Hermetic comment in this same letter: "Therefore seek yourself beyond

the world. To do so and to come to yourself you must fly beyond the world while you yourself comprehend it."

Section Five includes a speech in praise of philosophy by Ficino that runs two thousand words (42) (3.13). Ficino mentions several of the philosophers who deeply influenced him, and this alone makes the speech worth reading. We will pass on quotations, in spite of a richness to choose from.

Dialectics is a technical term often used in ancient philosophy, as well as Renaissance masters of this antique subject. The great intellects making frequent use of the term dialectics almost never provide a helpful definition—not even close. Ficino is a welcome exception in a letter almost two thousand words long. The subject, not surprisingly, is Plato, and yes, we have been there before. But Ficino provides the finest definition of ancient dialectics on record, and so we quote (46) (3.18).

Plato give dialectic, that is, knowledge of how truth is made manifest. But he means by dialectic not only that logic that teaches the first and most detailed rules of reasoning, but also the profound skill of the mind freed to comprehend the true and pure substance of each thing, first by physical, then by metaphysical principles. Thus the reason for anything can be made known and finally the light of the mind may be perceived beyond the nature of senses and bodies; and the incorporeal forms of things, which we call ideas, may be understood. By means of these, the same one source of all species, the origin and light of minds and souls, the beginning and end of all, which Plato calls the good itself, may be

inwardly perceived. The contemplation of this is wisdom, love of which is most correctly defined as philosophy.

Ficino is unique in providing a working definition of dialectics. His talent for containing a cosmic world in a single paragraph remains unmatched. In this same letter on Plato, Ficino works out a definition of philosophy, step by step, ever so careful. He is far from the first to define philosophy, but his many spiritual levels of definition are truly original, inspiring to legions of successors, and thereby worth quoting. First he defines good. Philosophers, after all, are nothing without their definitions.

For the good itself, which is God, could bestow nothing better on a man than a complete likeness of its own divinity, as near as possible.... Thus it comes about that philosophy is a gift, a likeness, and a most happy imitation of God. If anyone is endowed with philosophy, then out of his likeness to God he will be the same in earth as He who is God in heaven. For a philosopher is the intermediary between God and men; to God he is a man, to men God. Through his truthfulness he is a friend of God, through his freedom he is possessor of himself, through his knowledge of citizenship he is a leader of all other men.

Ficino's philosopher must always be a soul capable of intense mystical experiences. He is St. Francis, John of the Cross, and Socrates. In this same Section Five, Ficino writes another treatise in praise of philosophy, close to 2,500 words long (48) (1.123). Much we have heard before and much Ficino

will again set down on paper. The man was a tireless writer. But this latest treatise contains a brief Hermetic passage we need to quote. The Hermetic influence on Ficino was lasting and deep, and even our finest Ficino scholars can overlook this. The following claims held an impassioned exaggeration, which could only come from a full trust in that magnificent Egyptian god-man.

That the soul, with the help of Philosophy, can one day become God, we conclude from this: with Philosophy as its guide, the soul gradually comes to comprehend with its intelligence the natures of all things, and entirely assumes their forms; also through its will it both delights in and governs particular forms, therefore, in a sense, it becomes all things. Having become all things through this principle, step by step it is transformed into God, who is the fount of the Lord of them all. God truly prefects everything both within and without.

Ficino closes this treatise with a long, rhapsodic prayer to God. Ficino can convey the ecstasy of adoration in short, precise phrases.

We now move to Section Six of the *Selected Letters*, titled Fortune, Fate, and Happiness. We will concentrate on a long treatise in this new section, a letter to Lorenzo de Medici on Happiness, reaching 3,500 words. Lorenzo must have had considerable time on his hands.

Not surprisingly, Ficino's answer to eternal happiness is love of God and reverence of all things spiritual. Inquiries about the nature of God are useful, but will not bring happiness. Forget the intellectual wizardry and concentrate on pure divine

love—that way and only that way lies eternal happiness. We will not quote from this treatise, though it is well worth reading. Fortune and Fate show up in other sections, and we will deal with them there.

We now move to Section Seven of the *Selected Letters*, titled Divine Providence and the Good. Much of this material we have already heard, keeping in mind that Good means God in Ficino's vocabulary. He does write a letter to a fellow philosopher, Lotterio Neroni, that twice uses gold as a spiritual metaphor. Neroni would surely have thought of alchemy. He would not have set up an alembic in his home's spare room, but alchemy was a spiritual art and Neroni would have known that. So we quote (66) (5.20).

Let us therefore gain for ourselves, let us gain with our whole heart that burning gold that the heavenly eagle shows us: the pure light of truth, ablaze with the love of goodness. But we shall not easily obtain fire from light; rather than reverse, we shall obtain light from fire. For even gold does not burn when struck by rays from a distant fire; but when permeated by heat from one nearby, then indeed it shines. And it is because it does not really shine from the fire but becomes hot from the fire that it becomes completely incandescent. Thus only if we are afire with the love of the Highest Good, God alone, shall we at once shine with His splendor, and we shall be divine.

In another letter to Cavalcanti, Ficino provides an excellent definition of Plato's Forms. He starts with what Plato said in the *Timaeus* (61) (1.43).

When Plato said that God made all sense objects in the likeness of intelligible ones, he added that he made them in the likeness of Himself, the original model and God being almost the same. For truly, however many kinds of creature there are in this world, there are at least as many ideas of God. These ideas are intelligible principles through which all things are made. Created forms, which are in matter not in itself alive, either do not live or scarcely do so, but ideas have life because they are in the living God. Therefore Plato says in the same book that the divine mind by the power of thought has created with his own substance as many forms in this world as he has seen ideas in his living self.

Ficino writes a letter to Francesco Marescalchi, a fellow philosopher, with an emphasis on Christian prayer (68) (1.80). This letter is entirely personal, though dealing with a subject of obvious public interest. Ficino describes his own illness, with fever and diarrhea, while he was writing his book on Christian theology. The book came to a stop. Ficino promptly blamed his problems on astrology. The letter can be dated at September 6, 1474. He caught the fever in August. "Perhaps this year Saturn threatened me with this." Ficino often worried about Saturn, the planet known to trouble scholars, to inflict them with melancholy. He makes note where Saturn was at his birth: "At the time of my birth, it was in the ascending sign of Aquarius and was then in Cancer, my sixth house." These were his thoughts during fever and diarrhea.

Ficino turned to past reading for relief and possible healing.

There were times when I became so weak, Marescalchi, that I almost despaired of recovery. I then turned over in my mind those great works I have read during the last thirty years, to see if anything occurred to me that could ease a sick heart. Except for the Platonic authors, the writings of men did not help at all, but the works of Christ brought much more comfort than the words of philosophers. What is more, I offered prayers to the divine Mary and begged for some sign of recovery. I felt some relief immediately, and in dreams received a clear indication of recovery. So I do not owe a cock to Aesculapius, but my heart and body to Christ and His mother. One must always accept everything as leading to good, Marescalchi. Could it be that God wished to warn me by a sign during this illness that I must in future declare the Christian teaching with greater zeal and depth? A few days later, with a similar prayer, I was freed of the heat of my urine.

We realize this letter contradicts our previous Ficino quotations that praise philosophy, not Christian prayer, as the vital connection between God and man. What exactly did Ficino believe? He was a priest. His life was probably a long balancing act between Plato and Christ. He would finish his short work on Christian theology. But with healing of his urinary tract, his main emphasis would return to Plato, as well as Plato's finest followers. This was Ficino's life. This is what we remember him for.

When Ficino is feeling better, he composes a sustained praise of rapture to God (69) (1.116). Ficino nearly loses control of his ecstatic emotions, but not quite. He is a mystic who can be read with serious profit by other mystics. The mystic readers could be Christian—in the Renaissance, most of Ficino's followers would have been Christian—but they are climbing the firmly established stairs of Thrice-Great Hermes. Ficino's prayer runs to almost 1,500 words, and we can hardly quote that. He would be on his knees a very long time if he prayed that way. The intense rapture is almost unrelenting, and so the author must be in excellent health. We quote Ficino reaching for the highest. Trismegistus is often reaching upwards, ever upwards. In actual fact, Ficino did suffer a limp, and he mentions this in his overflowing Hermeticism, rather like a self-discovering Plotinus run wild.

For You penetrate my inmost being, O deep of the deeps, as You also raise me aloft, O highest of the high. What is it that penetrates my inmost being? What is it that lifts the highest in me? Certainly it is the miraculous rays of Your amazing goodness and beauty, that wonderfully pour through minds, souls and bodies, everlasting. By these You work in me, though I do not know it; by these, I say, sole majesty, You attract me, compel me, consume me utterly. See, already, see! I hasten breathless toward you, O matchless beauty. But ah! this lover of yours limps haltingly. Alas! Unhappy man, he limps! Stretch out Your holy hand to see one who limps, O my hope, I entreat You. I beseech You, lead him You attract, welcome him You capture, cool him You burn, bring joy to him You

torment. May You gladden him, O wonderful joy, source of all joys. For I know that whatever we desire is contained in Your unity, or rather it is Your unity we desire.

We now move to Section Eight in the *Selected Letters*, titled the Planets and Astrology. Much of Ficino's theories on astrology we covered in another chapter, when we discussed his pivotal writing on the stars, *De vita coelitus comparanda*. In that work and his letters, Ficino the priest faces the conflict between astrological determinism and his Catholic Church's dogma of free will. It is difficult to fence-straddle these strongly different theories, though Ficino spent a long lifetime doing just that, as we analyzed in our astrology chapter.

But one letter adds something strikingly new, for Ficino boldly foreshadows Isaac Newton's brilliant experiments of the color spectrum (75) (5.27). This letter can be dated on December 19, 1479; this time the author collaborated with Calvalcanti, and the length exceeds 1,500 words.

Does that light therefore shine forth compounded and multiple because it sees that many things within itself can be created from itself and this is that it wills? Not at all, since it does not see these many things through many forms but through one form, that is, the one light, the origin and model of the various colors. Nor does it make use of numerous powers of seeing and choosing, to see and choose multiplicity, but it sees multiplicity through a single power of seeing, and likewise chooses with a single will. Therefore it seems that multiplicity is perceived by intelligence alone, that is, by the clear insight

that discerns innumerable things and by the will that judges them. It is not, of course, by the intelligence of our eyes, which look up from here and see multiplicity in another realm, but by the intelligence of the light's own eye, which observes and judges things there in itself. Thus those observations by which the causal forms of colors are individually distinguished are not occasioned by these colors or by these eyes but by the light itself, which is all-discerning and totally transparent; by the light itself, which imparts itself to the different kinds of color. These are as many colors seen and chosen in this way as there are observations made by the light into itself. Multiplicity of this kind in that which sees and chooses does not negate the simplicity of its own nature.

It would be a stretch to compare Ficino (and Cavalcanti) to Isaac Newton, for the latter carried out carefully controlled, precise experiments that were exactly repeatable. Of course this is the backbone of the scientific method, unknown in Ficino's era. Yet his long comments on light do have a striking prophetic power. He did understand the basic properties of light even if he had no adequate method of testing.

We need to quote one final passage from Section Eight. Ficino is again writing to Lorenzo de Medici, and so he assumed his eventual audience would be large (79) (3.10). The letter can be dated April 14, 1477. Ficino wants to impress the public of his vast learning, and sadly does not show himself at his best. He begins an ecstatic prayer to the sun: "O, Sun! purging all men's hearts with your flames ... O, Sun! Source of

Justice! Sun! Model of generosity!" This is strong Hermetic language. In previous writings, Ficino has connected the sun with God, both as symbol and special power of God, and so his passionate Hermetic strain would not have been pounced on too harshly by the inquisition.

The problem with this passage is not theology, but Ficino's non-stop intellectual name-dropping. He had read everything, studied everything, and he wants to make certain his surrounding world knows this. This is a side of Ficino we would like to pass on, but he reveals so much of his burgeoning ego that we need to quote several lines. It is a long passage.

As you can cast your rays through everything,
Phoebus, so you can heal everything with your
health-giving flames; for, unlike Julian, the
Platonist and former, but apostate Christian, I
have not, being sunless yet hymned the very sun
himself. Nor, in company with Claudian, have I
impiously sung of your dear sister Proserpine,
snatched, as the story goes, into the underworld.
But rather, with Luke, Hierotheus, and
Dionysius, I have honored your son, a certain
Aesculapius, that doctor of souls from Tarsus,
who was carried off into the world above. And I
have not, like Stesichorus and Homer, depicted
the ill-fated seizer of Helen, that is earthly
appearance, but, as is the way of true Platonists, I
have depicted the sublime upward soaring of the
heavenly mind. Nor have I, like Numenius,
indiscriminately made public the Eleusinian
mysteries; nor, like Pherecydes of Syros,
disclosed to any earthly man the secrets of

heavenly beings; nor, like Hipparchus the Pythagorean, have I ever made common to everyone the Delphic mysteries of the sacred Seer, which are proper to very few.

The Platonic urge to soar is severely held down by all these learned names. Ficino has composed so many intensely brilliant passages, but not here.

We move now to Section Nine of the *Selected Letters*, titled Love, Friendship, and Marriage. Ficino writes more of friendship than marriage. He was, after all, a priest with a gift for friendship. He insisted God will always be present when a special loving closeness takes place between people. Ficino is not gender specific. His comments about marriage are trite and commonplace, while his passages on human love are often moving and profound. The great man wrote about what he knew. We will quote from one letter, again to Cavalcanti, who apparently had considerable free time (80) (1.47).

Certainly, love (as all philosophers define it) is the longing for beauty. The beauty of the body lies not in the shadow of matter, but in the light and grace of form; not in dark mass, but in clear proportion; not in sluggish and senseless weight, but in harmonious number and measure. But we come to that light, that grace, proportion, number, and measure only through thinking, seeing, and hearing. It is thus far that the true passion of a true lover extends. However, it is not love when the appetite of the other senses drives us rather toward matter, mass, weight, and the deformity that is the opposite of beauty or love, but a stupid, gross, and ugly lust.

This passage is immeasurably better than intellectual name-dropping. The Platonic Form of Beauty has been given a useful definition.

We move now to Section Ten of *Selected Letters*, titled Worldly Things and Civic Duty. This will be the final section. Ficino writes a public letter favoring peace in time of war (89) (3.8). The date was April 13, 1478.

I want to philosophize with you a little about war.

The evil spirits are in opposition to the blessed angels, the signs of the Zodiac to each other, planets to planets, animals to animals. Furthermore, movement is set against stillness, deprivation against possession, light against darkness, the white and clear against the black, sound against silence, high notes against low ones, the fragrant against the fetid, the salty against the insipid; and as the Aristotelians believe, sharp and bitter against sweet, hot against cold, dry against wet, light against heavy, dense against fine, rough against smooth, and finally, hard against soft.

It is unlikely Ficino left out any source of conflict. He might never have directly experienced war, but thought a lot about it. The major influence in this passage is a new one—Zoroaster. Ficino was interested in all major spiritual figures of ancient times, and that included the great Persian. Like Ficino's Florence, our own era knows little about Zoroaster, but we do know he preached an all-out cosmic dualism, good versus evil, white versus black, day versus night. He predicted a final

apocalyptic struggle, but his few chance fragments floating through time do not clarify the victor.

Ficino was a Christian, and so of course knew the ultimate victor. His Zoroastrian inspiration in our quotation is the heavy emphasis on dualism. We have watched Ficino pull out all the guns in expressing every possible collision of dualism. Enough collisions mean war. Ficino was inevitably a pacifist, but picking apart all his dualisms will not separate clashing armies. He knows as much about warfare as he does about marriage.

Ficino's methods work better with mysticism than war or politics. In yet another letter to Lorenzo de Medici, he makes a few intelligent statements about justice, surely a Platonic Form, and then suddenly explodes into a rhapsody of praise for justice. He reaches out to a goddess. Who could disagree? The better question: what figure in power, albeit Lorenzo, would be appropriately inspired. Listen and learn, perhaps.

In fact, if it (justice) is so vital to the structure of the world that its removal would mean the world's immediate destruction, its importance for the life of men cannot be expressed. Indeed, if justice were not present among men either they would herd together in one place and quickly be at each other's hands or they would have scattered to be separately torn to pieces by wild beasts. Oh eternal bond of the human race! Most wholesome cure for our sickness! Common soul of society! Justice that is blissful life! Justice that is heavenly life! Mother and Queen of the golden age, sublime Astrea seated among the starry thrones! Goddess, we beg you, do not abandon

your earthly abode, lest we sink miserably into the iron age. Heavenly goddess, we beseech you, ever live in human minds, that is, in citizens who belong to the heavenly country, so that for the present we may imitate the divine life as well as we can, and that in the time to come we may live it to the full.

Lorenzo would have liked thinking his city-state of Florence was golden and heavenly. His connection to a goddess was an extra plus. Ficino next wrote to a much higher figure than Lorenzo. He wrote a 3,500 word public plea to Pope Sixtus IV, a military and political enemy of Lorenzo (95) (5.1). This pope did not lead troops in battle, but he did frequently send them. Florence was at risk. Papal soldiers killed Lorenzo's brother and Lorenzo was wounded. Ficino showed definite coverage in writing openly to the pope, but his primary security would always come from Lorenzo.

Ficino wrote three letters to Pope Sixtus IV, all urgent pleas for peace. We will study the one listed. Ficino tells Sixtus that the papacy requires a shepherd and all the multitudes of little people, like Ficino himself, are the sheep. The Shepherd, like Christ whom he represents, has no greater duty than to protect and care for his sheep. That is what being pope is all about. Being shepherd precludes armed aggression. What is strongly implied throughout Ficino's long letter is how far, how desperately far, Sixtus falls or fails from being a good shepherd. Ficino has never used irony to better use. He adds to his compelling argument by comparing Sixtus to Saint Peter, the first pope and the splendid model for all future popes. Again Pope Sixtus falls far short, embarrassingly short, of the standard model. Let Ficino address his pontiff.

Look up to heaven for a while, we beseech you, as you used to once, before you turned your mind to these earthly battles. You will see Peter, the first pontiff, clearly seeing these wounds of mine, which perhaps you do not see yourself. You will see Peter, full of compassion, grieving deeply at my suffering. Perhaps, unless you take heed, it is inevitable that he, while pitying us so much, will be angry with you. But far be it from us, far be it that either Peter be angry with Sixtus or Sixtus displeased with his flock. It is a sin to predict anything bad for a good shepherd or to expect anything in the end from him except good.

Ficino might sound reverent, but the satire and sarcasm are intense. A pontiff at war with Florence would tear his hair out at this passage. He is not Peter. We continue without interruption.

For our Pontiff, the most far-sighted of all men, has not forgotten himself. He did not lose his own wisdom when he began to be wise for all. He did not cast off his natural generosity when he put on the mantle of the most generous Peter.

Lorenzo made a much more receptive audience for Ficino. Lorenzo wrote poetry—no rumor exists that Sixtus ever did this, or even read poetry—and Ficino uses his own poetic gifts to comment on evil and its opposite in a letter to Lorenzo (97) (5.44).

Lorenzo, the soul corrupted by evil conduct is like a wood dense with tangled thorns, bristling with savage beasts, infested with poisonous

snakes. Or it is like a swelling sea, tossed by battling winds, waves, and wild storms; or like a human body misshapen without and tortured within by excruciating pains in every joint. On the other hand, a mind endued with fine principles is like a well-tended and fertile field, or a calm and peaceful sea, or the body of a man that is both beautiful and strong.

Ficino might have been reading Dante's *Inferno*. We do know he read everything. Our last quote from Ficino will not show him at his best, but it will provide an excellent, extended example of medical practice in the late Quattrocento (98) (1.81).

Diseases, unless they are very dangerous, should not be irritated by drugs. For the whole constitution of diseases is rather like the nature of living beings. In fact the structure of living beings is bounded from the very beginning of their own generation by a set length of time. The whole genus is subject to this, and each being contains within itself its allotted life span from its birth, unless unavoidable events intervene. For the triangles, that is to say the proportional qualities, from the beginning hold the life force of every one, and hold together for the purpose of life up to a certain time. Life is not prolonged for any one beyond this fixed time. The same rule of nature applies to diseases. If anyone tries to shorten them by drugs before they have run their allotted course of time, illnesses that were minor or rare usually become serious or widespread.

The obvious question is how Ficino the physician ever healed anyone—but in all probability, he healed many, at least of those who came to him. He was a kind, wise man with expert musical gifts. Four centuries before Pasteur, that could go a long way.

We have quoted so much in this very long chapter because Ficino—in his letters, and only in his letters—has written so much so well. A study of the Florentine master would not be complete without them.

Chapter Eleven:

Aratus, Astrologer From the Ancient World

Aratus wrote his famous astrological poem, *Phenomena*, in about 270 B.C. Ancient sources, most notably Hipparchus in 150 B.C., do not credit Aratus with original ideas. The astrological wisdom in Aratus comes from Eudoxus, who apparently dazzled the ancient world with his knowledge about the stars. Unfortunately not a single writing, not a word, of Eudoxus has survived. So we have Aratus, inspired by his great predecessor to write his poem. Hipparchus commented on Aratus, and the poet's work moved slowly through the middle ages. We cannot prove *Phenomena* ever crossed Ficino's desk, but it is a work he would have had routine access to. His interest in the content was lifelong. For our text of Aratus, we use the best, The Loeb Classical Library, translated into prose by G. R. Mair.

Aratus' *Phenomena* comes in two parts: a compilation of traditional astrological lore, back in the days when that information also meant astronomy, and a surprising second section on weather forecasting, which reproduces many aspects

of ancient folklore. Aratus is filled with advice. Early in his poem, he advises sailors. We quote:

But even in the previous month, storm-tossed at sea, when the Sun scorches the Bow and the Wielder of the Bow, trust no longer in the night but put to shore in the evening. Of that season and that month let the rising of Scorpion at the close of night be a sign to thee. For verily his great Bow does the Bowman draw close by the Scorpion's sting, and a little in front stands the Scorpion at his rising, but the Archer rises right after him. Then, too, at the close of night Cynosura's head runs very high, but Orion just before the dawn wholly sets and Cepheus from hand to waist.

Aratus has many more instructions to these sailors, who certainly spent their night hours looking skyward. Impressively, Aratus avoids astrological determinism. When he has looked at stars, he has often stood on the deck of ships, or holds the imagination to think like sailors. His finest writing describes a storm at sea. We contend he had at least once been there.

For ships in trouble pain her heart, and other signs in other quarters she kindles in sorrow for mariners, storm-buffeted at sea. Wherefore I bid thee pray, when in the open sea, that that constellation wrapt in clouds appear not amidst the others in the heavens, herself unclouded and resplendent but banked above with billowing clouds, as often it is beset when the autumn wind drives them back. For often Night herself reveals this sign, also, for the South Wind in her

kindness to toiling sailors. If they heed her favouring signs and quickly lighten their craft and set all in order, on a sudden lo! their task is easier: but if from on high a dread gust of wind smite their ship, all unforeseen, and throw in turmoil all the seas, sometimes they make their voyage all beneath the waves, but at other times, if they win by their prayers Zeus to their aid, and the might of the north wind pass in lightning, after much toil they yet again see each other on the ship. But at this sign fear the South Wind, until thou seest the North Wind come with lightning. But if the shoulder of the Centaur is as far from the western as from the eastern sea, and a feint mist veils it, while behind night kindles like signs of storm upon the gleaming Altar, thou must not look for the South butbethinks thee of an East Wind.

Our habit is to provide lengthy quotes of little-known writers when the passage shows them at their best. Aratus' best is not brilliantly dazzling, but well worth reading, and his legions of readers significantly increased as the centuries passed. He was that all-important link to writers steeped in legend like Eudoxus, nameless writers from the ancient world of long before him, writers whose ideas only exist in Aratus' verse. Aratus was a careful student of the Zodiac. He could obviously have accomplished this on his own, but it provides a useful quote.

When Hydrochus is just risen, up wheel the feet
and head of the Horse. But opposite Horse, starry
night draw the Centaur, tail-first, beneath the

horizon, but cannot yet engulf his head and broad shoulders, breast and all. But she sinks beneath the verge the coiling neck and all brow of the gleaming Hydra. Yet many a coil of the Hydra remains, but Night engulfs her wholly with the Centaur, when the Fishes rises; with the Fishes the Fish which is placed beneath azure Aegoceros rises—not completely but part awaits another sign of the Zodiac. So the weary hands and knees and shoulders of Andromeda are parted—stretched some below and others above the horizon, when the two Fishes are newly risen from the ocean. Her right side the Fishes bring, but the left the rising Ram. When the latter rises, the Altar is seen setting in the West, while in the East may be seen as much as the head and shoulders of Perseus.

What this extended passage shares with the sea-storm quote is the richness in vivid detail that could be attained only by Aratus' direct experience. He truly did study the skies. He might have looked at astrological charts or handbooks, but his primary knowledge derived from steadfast sky-watching. Curiously our volume will contain many mentions and quotations on astrology, but our Aratus' passage is the most detailed and specific. It might be our one included passage that a seriously practicing astrologer could work with. We do well to take it seriously.

We move now to the second section of Aratus' verse treatise, the weather signs and their practical signs for farmers. Aratus relies strongly on the moon, along with countless predecessors, but his urgent specificity would not be found

elsewhere, at least not in verse. Let us give Aratus another hearing.

Scan her (the Moon) when full and when half-formed on either side of full, as she waxes and wanes again to crescent form, and from her hue forecast each month. When quite bright her hue, forecast fair weather; when ruddy, expect the rushing wind; when dark stained with spots, look out for rain. But not for everyday is appointed a separate sign, but the signs of the third and fourth day betoken the weather up to the half Moon; those of the half Moon up to full Moon; and in turn the signs of the full Moon up to the waning half Moon; the signs of the half Moon are followed by those of the fourth day from the end of the waning month, and they in their turn by those of the third day of the new month. But if halos encircle all the Moon, set triple or double about her or only single—with the single ring, expect wind or calm; when the ring is broken, wind; when faint and fading, calm; two rings girding the Moon forbade storm; a triple halo would bring a greater storm, and greater still, if black, and more famous still, if the rings are broken. Such warnings for the month thou canst learn from the Moon.

If our reader has not yet acquired a taste for Aratus, he might wish to pass over the coming quotes. Yet we persist in quoting. Stubborn? Perhaps. But Aratus is not so much important in himself, but as a representative of all the numerous dedicated sky-watchers who followed him, from classical times

to the Renaissance, when Marsilio Ficino writes a major work on astrology. What binds Aratus to Ficino, besides a lasting devotion to their subject, is they were both naked-eye astronomers. In the history of science, this term has a precise meaning: those who studied the brightly lit sky at night, before the telescope, were using their naked eyes—hence the term. Copernicus and Kepler were the two great naked-eye astronomers who made lasting astronomical discoveries of profound impact. Aratus is hardly in that category. All these names at times considered astronomy and astrology as interchangeable terms.

Aratus' value remains as an historical entity. When Florentines in Ficino's era studied their master's astrological treatises, they either held Aratus as a solid background figure—this can never be proved—or astrological writings of a similar nature. Medical students at Italian universities during the Quattrocento were required to study astrology.

Again they either studied Aratus or similar authors. Another Aratus' quote shows the poetic potential in astrology.

And ere now before rain from the sky, the oxen
gazing heavenward have been seen to sniff the
air, and the ants from their hollow nests bring up
in haste all their eggs, and in swarms the
centipedes are seen to climb the walls, and
wandering forth crawl those worms that men call
dark earth's intestines (earthworms). Tame fowl
with father Chanticleer will preen their plumes
and cluck aloud with voice like noise of water
dripping upon water.

Ere now, too, the generations of crows
and tribes of jackdaws have been a sign of rain to

come from Zeus, when they appear in flocks and screech like hawks. Crows, too, imitate with their note the heavy splash of clashing rain, or after twice croaking deeply they raise a loud with frequent flapping of their wings, and ducks of the homestead and jackdaws which haunt the roof seek cover under the eaves and clap their wings, or seaweed flies the heron with shrill screams.

It is difficult to find concluding remarks for Aratus, for the ever observant poet speaks so well for himself. He is fully confident in his methods, both in astrology and weather forecasting. He might have wondered about our modern mind that felt the need to separate them, or our world that did not find his message absolutely essential. He is not vain, but convinced of his total value. He touches all highs and lows of the cosmos. He is a fine epic poet on a very small scale.

Chapter Twelve:

Lucretius, Ancient Poet of the Atom

Paul Kristellar, in his *Eight Italian Philosophers of the Renaissance*, notes that Lucretius was a significant influence on Ficino. This is an interesting, thought-provoking statement. Our problem with Kristellar is he merely makes the statement and moves on. Nobody would be better qualified for a detailed analysis than Kristellar, but we are left on our own.

We also know one legend about Ficino and Lucretius, which quite likely could be true. No evidence remains either way. Ficino was preparing a translation with commentary of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things), a long pagan poem which savagely discounts the need for belief in any god or gods, when Ficino was taken suddenly ill, seriously ill. Ficino connected his illness with his serious work with a writer holding Lucretius' extreme pagan views. Lucretius argued vigorously against superstition and yes, Ficino was being superstitious, a trait which increased when he destroyed all his work on Lucretius and vowed never to approach that writer again. Ficino's health promptly improved and he got better. Legend? He threw all the shredded remains of his Lucretius

enterprise into the Arno River and watched the little fragments float rapidly away. Legend? If true, we can understand why Ficino might subsequently have feared Lucretius, but we still need to probe the original interests.

Lucretius was an ancient poet, and Ficino was interested in all things ancient. Lucretius was a poet of great extraordinary gifts, and surely this tempted Ficino in spite of the steadfast atheist content. Atheist is not a word Ficino would have used, but it applies. Lucretius lived from about 95 B.C. to 55 B.C., and his poem *De rerum natura* is our only complete source of the philosophy of Epicurus, who lived from 341 B.C. to 271 B.C.

By any standards, Epicurus is a major philosopher, but by Ficino's time, less than a handful of his writings—and some of these questionable—had survived. This would have deeply saddened Epicurus. He took his work seriously, and wrote over 300 treatises. Yet he is largely remembered by Lucretius' long poem, which provides a complete, detailed recounting of Epicurus' ideas. Take away Lucretius and we would also have to take away Epicurus. Epicurus would be another of those honored ancient names about which we know almost nothing. If we need other examples, consider the Pre-Socratics. Epicurus has much to be thankful for. Fame and fortune sometimes work out that way.

Our edition of *De rerum natura* is edited and translated by Anthony M. Esolen, published by the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1995. Esolen himself is a gifted poet, making this a splendid translation. Lucretius' poem is divided into six books. Each book averages 1,000 lines of unrhymed hexameter, in both original and translation.

Lucretius made famous the atomist theory. For someone writing two millennia ago, this was advanced thinking. It was Epicurus' credo. Lucretius could not have understood the complications of quantum mechanics. He would have felt all those modern mathematical computations on the blackboard to be sheer foolishness. The cosmos is not so complicated, not nearly so. According to Lucretius—and before him Epicurus—the entire cosmos is composed of two parts: atoms and the void. Atoms can be different, but the void is utter emptiness, always the same, wherever, the void is the void, and thereby not so interesting.

Atoms are too small to be detected by human eyes. That probably went without saying, but Lucretius says it several times. He does not want his readers to wander about outside searching for them. The void is also invisible. This requires saying. The void is all the invisible spaces between all the invisible parts of matter called atoms. Matter cannot get smaller than atoms. Lucretius could not have conceived of today's endlessly varying, sub-atomic world. He was writing nineteen centuries before Einstein's first notions of relativity. His realm of thought was simpler, and he treasured that simplicity.

Lucretius' atoms cannot be created or destroyed, but they must always move about ceaselessly. They would not be atoms if they were not moving. Hence the smallest parts of matter—those indestructible parts that we can never see—are never at rest. In order for movement, there must be space, and all that seemingly endless space is called the void. Atoms can differ by size, shape, form, speed or direction of movement. Atoms do not have color. The cosmos is filled with color. Lucretius provides many beautiful descriptive passages of

scenic color, which depicts atoms coming together in nearly countless ways.

Lucretius' atom theory now gets a little sticky. Only a limited number of kind of atoms exists. Lucretius makes no mention of this number. However, each kind can have an infinite number of representatives. So the finite kind has infinite members. Yes, this is vague. We are not even close to a periodic chart. We might not be close to science. All these atoms and void are randomly, by sheer chance controlled by a nebulous concept called Nature and occasionally by an equally nebulous concept called All.

Nature or All might not hold much control over the cosmos, but according to Lucretius, no other control exists. Hence no place exists for any god or gods. If these creatures hold no place in the cosmos, they surely hold no power, and therefore any human fear or worshipping of them is puerile nonsense. Lucretius makes this difficult point several times, and eventually Ficino must have found it uncomfortable. Why did he keep reading? Better question: why did he keep translating?

Ficino was always fascinated with the human soul. In perusing his collected works, no greater interest can be found. Hence he would have found Lucretius' several statements on the soul to be both original and interesting. He also might have been a little frightened. Lucretius felt no differently about the soul than he did about the sunlight or raindrops or oak trees—all were made of atoms and void and only that. Hence within Lucretius' theory, soul and mind are one and the same—a huge leap of definition—because all are composed of atoms and void, and that defines their similarity. We still do not know exactly what soul and mind are, other than their one main function; they record what the five physical senses tell them, and the senses

can only tell them what various combinations of atoms and void are doing. No god or gods is involved here. Whatever soul or mind might be, they are engaging in sheer waste to consider deities. The gods tell us nothing, only the senses. This is the backbone of Lucretius.

After Ficino finished wading through Lucretius' overlapping definitions of soul and mind and what they do,

And more: you'll notice the soul, as one with the
body,
Is affected the same and shares the body's
feeling.

(lines 161-169)

What sorts of atoms constitute the soul
And where they come from, I'll explain to you.
To start, I say that the soul is super-subtle,
Composed of tiniest particles. Consider,
To prove the truth of my hypothesis,
That nothing we see can happens so swiftly as
The mind imagines and initiates.
Quicker therefore the mind will spur itself
Than anything we see before our eyes.
But since it's so quick to move, it must consist
Of the roundest and tiniest seeds, so that a small
Impulse can drive them forward into motion.

(lines 177-188)

This too will help establish the soul's nature,
How finely woven it is and what small space
Would hold it, if it could be gathered up:
That as soon as the imperturbable peace of Death

Lays hold of a man, and the mind and soul have
departed,

You detect nothing dwindling from the body,
Nothing to see or to weigh. Death guarantees
All, save life-giving sense and the moist warm
breath.

Thus all the soul must be necessity
Be made of the tiniest seeds, be interwoven
So fully with veins, flesh, muscle that when it
leaves

The body deserted, the outer contour is
Preserved intact and not a jot the lighter.

(lines 208 – 220)

All since the mind is just one part of a man
Fixed in its proper place, like eyes and ears
And the other organs of sense that steer our lives,
And just as a hand or an eye or nose is severed
From us, can neither sense nor even be
(Rather resolves directly into rot),
So by itself the soul can't live—it needs
The body, the man who is its vessel, or
Whatever image you can find that joins
More intimately, for the body is bound fast
Indeed, the living powers of body and soul
Join in their strength, delight in life together.
For without the body, alone, the soul cannot
Make motions that bring forth life; if stripped of
soul
The body can't last long or use its senses.
Knew then, as an eye that's plucked out roots
and all

Sees nothing, torn away from the rest of the body,
So too, alone, the spirit can do nothing.
Of course—for mingled in the veins and flesh,
In bone and muscle, the atoms of the soul are held
By the whole body and can't leap free in flight
Over great intervals; shut in, they stir
The sense-bearing motions, but cast by death
from the body
Into the winds they cannot make those motions
Because they're not confined in the same way.
A body, a breathing thing—air would be that
If it could bind the soul and lock it into
Motions that stirred in the sinews once, in the body.

(lines 546 – 573)

Ficino would find all these passages on the soul—and Lucretius provided many—to be deeply interesting. He would strongly disagree, especially in Lucretius' repeated insistence that each soul shall die. But Ficino would keep reading. Not many voices from the ancient world talked about the soul, certainly not to this extent. Lucretius often wrote about meeting everlasting death with calm, stable serenity. Ficino might have suspected his worthy predecessor protested a bit too much for total conviction.

Lucretius is not more hopeful about the earth and the heavens overhead than the human soul. All these magnificent structures must also die. Since earth and the heavens are made entirely of atoms and the void—we have been all through this before—then what happens to all these seemingly countless

atoms when nothing exists? Farewell, heaven and earth. But what about all those atoms? Lucretius does not say. Might these innumerable random atoms come together to form new structures and life forms, never seen before? Lucretius does not say. Apparently his atoms get one grand performance, what ancients first called the cosmos, and when that has passed, no one should expect a second act, not that anybody would be around waiting. This does not seem an intellectual pathway for lifelong serenity, but Lucretius had many followers.

Perhaps readers would be the better word. Lucretius' manifold gifts as a poet far outweigh the logic or comfort provided as a philosopher. Epicurus was indeed fortunate to have his atomistic theory spread in such splendid verse. Lucretius turns Miltonic and yes, somewhat reverent and even prayerful in the following extended quotation from Book Five. If we can admire him as a poet, we can understand why Ficino pursued him as a reader.

Now let us sing what causes stars to move.
To start, if the great sphere of heaven turns,
We'll say it's air that presses upon both poles,
Clasping the axis, locking it in place;
One current then flows above and bends toward
 where
The stars of the ageless World from below, in the
 other direction,
As we see streams turn waterwheels and dippers!
Or it may be that all the heavens stand
In one still place, where the brilliant signs sweep
 on—
Maybe swift surges of ether are damned inside,
And seek a way out and as they turn, here, there,

Their flames roll through the thundering fields of
night;
Or maybe, from somewhere beyond the World, a
wind
Impels the fire to turn; or the stars themselves
Mosey to where their grazing lands invite them,
Feeding their flame-forms scattered in the sky.
To settle upon what's certain in this world,
That's hard. But what might possibly apply
In various words arranged in various ways,
That I can show, and set forth many causes
Of stellar motion through the universe.
One of those anyway must be what stirs
The stars to move; but to find which it is
Is not for our slow, step-by-step advance.

(lines 509 - 533)

Lucretius does not end his masterpiece on an uplifting note, but the writing is brilliant. In his closing 136 lines of Book Six, he describes in vivid horrifying detail the plague. He could not have chosen a more apocalyptic subject. We have quoted enough, but those lines are well worth reading. His poem's final lines show the utter hopelessness of any religion to stand up against the plague. Religion is hopeless, helpless, futile, tragically laughable. Lucretius did not write any further. He clearly felt he did not have to.

Chapter Thirteen:

Manilius, The Most Devoted of Ancient Astrologers

Manilius lived at the beginning of the Christian era, though his exact dates are impossible to pinpoint. His great poem, *Astronomica*, early indicates the Emperor Augustus was still alive, and later the poem indicates Augustus has recently died. This gives us an approximate date of 20 A.D. Manilius might be surprised his *Astronomica* is still in print, but he would insist this could only be caused by the changing positions of the planets and stars for the past two thousand years. Manilius believed whatever happens in any era or hour of the day has either been caused or powerfully influenced by the heavenly bodies. That is the subject of *Astronomica*, divided into five books.

Our edition is from the Loeb Classical Library, edited and translated from Latin verse into English prose by G. P. Goold. The prose has a steady clarity, providing a smooth read, with the only bump in the road when Manilius develops his own complex mathematics of astrology, and no translator could make that read well.

Manilius provided the early Renaissance—and hence Ficino—with the most complete textbook of astrology. When he avoided math, he was a fine poet. Ficino believed in the powers of astrology, but never to the extent of Manilius. Perhaps no astrologer was ever so trusting in the skies as Manilius. His poem's first line refers to magic, an early reference of the term with regards to the heavens, and he proclaims himself a singer. He will often refer to himself as a singer throughout *Astronomicaa*. He sees himself as both poet and astrologer.

Early in Book One, he describes his astrological method, and we quote:

After every aspect of the sky has been observed,
as the stars return to their original positions, and
each figuration had assigned to its powers of
influence in accordance with the sure cycles of
destiny, by repeated practice and with examples
pointing the way experience built up the science;
and from wide observation discovered that by
hidden laws the stars wield sovereign power and
that all moves to the eternal spirit of reason and
by sure tokens distinguishes the vicissitudes of
fate.

This might not sound like great poetry, but expository verse seldom his. Manilius is teacher as much as poet and astrologer. He assumes his reader knows very little about his subject, and yet the reader experienced in astrology can learn a great deal more. He tells the legend of Phaethon and the Milky Way. He is a fine storyteller in miniature. His poetry reaches sublime or fantastic heights when he describes particular

aspects of the heavens. It would be a rare scholar who can read through *Astronomica* in one sitting.

Manilius the poet writes a long, extended passage about comments and shooting stars. It is not exactly clear Manilius knows the difference between these two heavenly phenomena, but his poetry soars. We quote in part. We are still in Book One.

There are also shooting stars, which hurl long trails of slender fire and are seen flying everywhere, when wandering lights flash through the clear sky, and dart afar like winged arrows, tracing the slender line of a path on high. Indeed, fire is found mingled with every part of the universe; it dwells in the laden clouds and forges lightning, it makes its way into the earth and threatens heaven with the flames of Etna, it causes waters to boil at their very sources, and finds a habitation in hard flint and verdant bark, when trees dashed against trees are set aflame; to such an extent does all nature bound with fire.

Aristotle might have liked this passage, except for the poetry. This is poetry. Ficino would have liked all of it. He would have immediately noted the basic Hermetic concept—as shown above, so below. Manilius has connected the shooting stars with Mount Etna. The power of fire is awesome. A Renaissance alchemist might have found this passage useful, but these notions would have been beyond Manilius.

Moving to Book Two, Manilius becomes more specific about the astrological symbols he so deeply believes in. There is a strange arbitrary quality about Manilius' belief system, which must be based on symbols since astrology is based on symbols. If several stars form a pattern resembling a bear, then the

symbol is a bear, not entirely arbitrary, for the astrologer sees a bear and not a camel or ship. Meanwhile, other astrologers also look at those stars and see a bear—so bear it is. If that last sentence seems a bit bewildering, then we are right on track in explicating Manilius' astrology. A specific collection of omens, good, bad, in-between, are connected solidly with the bear constellation, next these omens are connected with specific months, days, hours, and finally the omens with specific times are connected with a human person. Again the Hermetic precept is upheld—as above, so below.

The stars making up the bear constellation truly exist. The Zodiac is an entirely different matter. The Zodiac is a creation of the human imagination and otherwise would have no existence. Hence the Zodiac is arbitrary in the strongest possible terms. Yet Manilius the astrologer, and so many others like him, including Ficino, give the Zodiac figures or symbols the same potential omens over humans as the bear constellation. The constellation exists and the Zodiac truly does not, and yet both have the potential for comparative power over humans. Manilius, like other astrologers, often makes the powers of the constellation interact with the powers of the Zodiac. He does this without batting an eye, and fourteen centuries later, though to a far lesser extent, did Ficino. Manilius believed in the powers of each Zodiac sign—Scorpio, Crab, Twins—as deeply as he believed in the astrological powers of Sun, Moon, Jupiter, bear constellation. Manilius' faith might not be based on accurate fundamentals, but his faith in those fundamentals is unquestioning, lasting, and profound. He is not a doubter. His poetry is always driving forward—he is a singer—without false paths or hesitations.

Book Three contains the overly complicated math of Manilius' astrology. If a reader desires to pass over a book, this would be the one. The Loeb Classical Library's edition of Manilius has a long introduction which attempts to make sense of Book Three, using several maps, charts, and graphs. A reader is welcome to go there. Loeb always does an excellent job. But Manilius was a poor astronomer. He understood the four cardinal points, the North Star, the equator, but little else. His habitual need to be arbitrary will not work with true astronomy, though it has proved the astrologer's guidepost.

Manilius becomes an important ancient poet in Book Four and only that book. An editor putting together an anthology of great writing from the ancient classical world would do well to include Book Four, perhaps in its entirety. Manilius begins Book Four by forgetting astrology to set down 150 poetic lines in praise of the Stoic philosophy. This should not be surprising. A convinced astrologer who slept well at night would almost have to be a Stoic. We set down a sample of this side of our poet.

Set free your minds, O mortals, banish your cares, and rid your lives of all this vain complaint! Fate rules the world, all things stand fixed by its immutable laws, and the long ages are assigned a predestined course of events. At birth our death is sealed, and our end is consequent upon our beginning. Fate is the source of riches and kingdoms and the more frequent poverty; by fate are men at birth given their skills and characters, their merits and defects, their losses and gains. None can renounce what is bestowed or possess what is

denied; no man by prayer may seize fortune if it demur, or escape if it draw nigh: each one may bear his appointed lot.

Manilius goes on in this vein for many more lines. We have quoted less than ten percent of his passage on Stoicism. If he could do nothing pro-active about the Zodiac and stars, he had to accept them. Perhaps the poet protests too much, methinks. Not even the leading advocates of Stoicism who preceded Manilius stressed their belief system in such an uncompromising manner. Manilius provides many examples from myth and history—he might not have been able to distinguish the two—of hapless individuals who could not overcome Fate, and our poet defines these examples in fresh original language, moving swiftly from one image to another, a technique of proper names almost Miltonic, with the overall, cumulative effect a staggering blow against human control over his own affairs. Manilius is convincing. His gifts as a poet are high. Otherwise Ficino would not have read him, nor would scholars today.

Manilius shows his deep commitment to the Zodiac in Book Four. He writes a solid, self-contained passage, thirty to thirty-five lines, about the twelve Zodiac signs. This is fine writing. Of course those passages and signs can interrelate, in all kinds of ways; that's why this is astrology, and Manilius would have it no other way. Each Zodiac sign is connected to a specific part of the human body. Ficino the physician would have found this interesting, as would Paracelsus. We will quote one Zodiac passage, the Crab, for it shows Manilius at his best. The reader is invited to read all the others.

Shining at the hinge of the year by the
blazing turning-point which when recalled the

Sun rounds in his course on high, the Crab occupies a joint of heaven and bends back the length of day. Of a grasping spirit and unwilling to give itself in service the Crab distributes many kinds of gain, and skill in making profits; he enables a man to carry his investment of foreign merchandise from city to city and, with an eye on steep rises in the price of corn, to risk his money upon sea-winds; to sell the world's produce to the world, to establish commercial ties between so many unknown lands, to search out under foreign skies fresh sources of gain, and from the high price of his goods to amass sudden wealth. With heaven's favour he also sells seasons of idleness at rates of interest to his liking, wishing the swift passage of time to add to the principal. His is a shrewd nature, and he is ready to fight for his profits.

In natal astrology, all this happens to the person born under the sign of the Crab. But in spite of this nice, effective, set passage, astrology for Manilius, natal or otherwise, is never so simple. Manilius might not have found astrology so fascinating, or convincing, if he could not make his subject so endlessly complicated. Okay, a person is born under the sign of Crab, but the positions of the Sun and Moon also matter, always them, and where was Venus, always important, at the birth moment, and what about Saturn, the largest planet. These speculations could go on and on, and Manilius would like that. He could write more good poetry.

Manilius repeats his virtues in Book Four in the next and final book. He continues to write character descriptions, now

moving from signs to the Zodiac to constellations, but the content and technique is the same. As above, so below. The constellations powerfully influence those bodies in space below them, and Manilius writes far more lines about constellations, well over fifty, than Zodiac signs. We conclude our Manilius chapter by an excerpt from his long passage on the constellation Cepheus.

But Cepheus, rising beside the dripping Waterman, will not engender dispositions inclined to sport. He fashions faces marked by a stern demeanour, and moulds a countenance whereon is depicted gravity of mind. Such men will live on worry and will incessantly recall the traditions of a bygone age and commend old Cato's maxims. Cepheus will also create a man to bring up boys of tender age: he will lord it over his lord by virtue of the law which governs a minor and, bemused by this semblance of power, will mistake for reality the role of arrogant guardian or stern uncle which he plays.

Chapter Fourteen:

Pythagoras, First Magus of the Ancient World

If we are agreed Ficino is the founder of magical philosophy in the Renaissance, with a strong enduring influence, then we must concede Pythagoras holds these two claims to posterity for the ancient world. A major theorem of geometry is attributed to Pythagoras, though no sound proof exists to connect him with this theorem. He holds a curious kind of immortality. Students of philosophy immediately know his name, but are a little at a loss to make a clear specific statement about his life or teachings.

Then there is the all-pertinent question if he lived at all. Scholars have persisted in asking that, because his biographical information is so contradictory, rare, and fragmentary. Iamblichus wrote the only known biography of Pythagoras, but this effort is a pamphlet rather than a book and it praises the virtues of Pythagoras rather than recounts the facts of his life. Iamblichus makes interesting reading, but he cannot be used as bedrock proof of Pythagoras' existence.

But the nay-sayers of Pythagoras find themselves thrust up against one solid mountain of fact: Pythagoras left behind

legions of devoted followers, a devoted brotherhood, who spread his sacred teachings by word of mouth to only the most worthy initiates. Granted, this is not the best way to attain huge numbers of followers, but it did prove a vital, successful way to keep the movement alive for several centuries. It is unlikely such heightened prolonged reverence could have inspired initiates for a founding leader who never existed. It is not begging the question to suggest those initiates knew a great deal more about Pythagoras than we do today. Remarkable legends must have been whispered over moonlit campfires, inspiring tales that have been lost over the mists of time.

Yet Pythagoras' name has never been lost, and his geometric theorem is only a small part of this. Holy men and wise teachers existed by the score in the ancient world, and yet all are forgotten. Perhaps some came to be overlooked in their own lifetimes. But not Pythagoras. When his revered name entered Ficino's Florence, his legions of followers had existed for two thousand years. Once upon a time, so very long ago, there must have been a most extraordinary man.

Ficino did own a very short body of writing that was attributed to Pythagoras, titled *The Golden Verses*. The verses number seventy-one, and were published with a commentary by Hierocles, a Greek scholar who lived in Alexandria from 420-450 A.D. In all probability, Ficino read Hierocles' commentary, as did large numbers of other Renaissance students of magic. Both Pythagoras and Hierocles had an audience they could never have imagined. The Renaissance was an age of commentary—often commentary on commentary—and Hierocles' was one of the most popular.

It will be useful to compare Pythagoras' *Golden Verses* with the brief, poetic, sacred writings attributed to Zoroaster. In

neither case can authorship be proved. Yet in both cases, the brief works are as close as we are ever likely to get to the original author, and so we read them with great care and interest. After all, there is just the chance, however slight, that the author's name on the title page could be accurate.

We propose to discuss *The Golden Verses* with Hierocles' commentary because of the strong, lasting impact this work would hold on magical thinking in the Renaissance and long afterwards. We use the able English translation by N. Rowe. We conclude by discussing the commentary by a French philosopher, Fabre D'Olivet, who lived during the Napoleonic age, and provides Christian insight into *The Golden Verses*. The authors of Volume Three of our Ficino project would have known D'Olivet. His work has been translated into English by Nayan Louise Redfield.

Hierocles states Pythagoras studied the secrets of Egyptian religion by residing there for twenty-two years. Our commentator cannot provide the specific dates, but that might not have bothered Ficino, who would have taken strong note that Pythagoras had sought sacred wisdom at the same everlasting nourishing fount as Thrice-Great Hermes. What Ficino thought, so many other Renaissance thinkers also thought. Hierocles does provide specific dates for Pythagoras' life: 582-507 B.C. If the ancient sage did live, these would be a reasonable approximation. A main part of Pythagoras' legend is he traveled widely, seeking newfound wisdom wherever he could.

Hierocles indicates no man could have learned so much if he had stayed only in one place. This places tremendous weight on those seventy-two *Golden Verses*, which Hierocles analyzes in the same order that his master composed them, so

he can easily refer back to what he has already talked of. Though he never explicitly says so, he trusts his master put those verses in their received order for profound philosophical reasons, for Pythagoras' mind would always work this way. If Hierocles can never quite explain those reasons, the problem can only be with himself.

Hierocles finds the *Golden Verses* to be far more than a consecutive collection of magical utterances, though magic often plays a significant part. This is especially true for the magic of numerology. Curiously *The Golden Verses* make no mention of the music of the spheres, a complex occult or magic system with Pythagoras long considered the originator. The most famous of all Pythagoras legends shows him walking by a blacksmith shop and noting the pleasant sounds of hammer on anvil. Returning to his private quarters, Pythagoras invents a stringed instrument, often called a monochord, to duplicate the blacksmith's wondrous sounds. Pythagoras soon learns he is hearing the basic intervals of western music: the octave, the fifth, the third. He next makes a magnificent leap of the imagination—no one ever made a greater one—by declaring these musical intervals represented the true intervals between the planets—hence, the term music of the spheres. This was magic of the highest order, and it would fascinate both Renaissance maguses and scientists, both John Dee and Kepler.

But it did not fascinate Hierocles, at least not enough to enter his commentary, nor the French commentary of Fabre D'Olivet eighteen centuries later. Both our commentators adhered closely to the material of *The Golden Verses*, which combined the supernatural with magic, and which above all else sought teaching man a proper way to live.

Hierocles analyzes the first *Golden Verse* in a manner that Ficino would have found fully acceptable. God is the highest, ineffable power, beyond any human attempts at true knowledge or understanding. But below God is a trio, a hierarchy very similar to Ficino's method. Hierocles places at the top ranking of his trio the Immortal God, who can partake of the Supreme Being but not decisively so. The next lowest ranking are angels, and these angels themselves have three rankings: angels, heroes, daimons. These heroes are wondrous supernal beings filled with goodness and light, and should not be mistaken with a brave warrior on Homer's battlefield. The daimons are terrestrial, thereby earthbound, yet have spiritual powers far in excess of humans. The last of the three main categories is, not surprisingly, the human.

Hierocles is quite clear in stating all this. Truly, it is a great thing to be a human, for the opposite would be not to have been born at all. All three categories interact. Pythagoras has provided an hierarchical cosmos far more active than Plato or Thrice-Great Hermes. Yet at no time can the reader avoid realizing that Pythagoras' entire creation is entirely arbitrary. Just exactly what is a terrestrial daimon, and how high can he uplift himself over the atmosphere to meet an angel? Hierocles indicates such possibilities exist but never specifies. He might have been wise not to try to. If Pythagoras, the all-wise, had felt more information was needed, he surely would have provided it.

A similar statement can be made with the gender of all these beings. Male or female? A little of each? The most glorious sage was not given to basic details, and the humbly reverent Hierocles was hardly in a position to make them up. Perhaps Ficino was not frustrated from the confusion in all this, but the modern reader is. That might explain why the twenty-

first century does not find bands of Pythagorean brotherhood traipsing around Athens or Times Square or Sedona.

Verse two advises the follower to honor his word. No argument there. Verse three stresses how heroes are to be revered, while the next verse declares terrestrial daimons were to be honored. Of course these verses would be easier to follow if we could recognize these creatures, if we knew who they were.

Next the *Golden Verses* make a sudden and abrupt change, and what follows is all to the better. From Verse four to Verse forty-four, Pythagoras removes himself from the theological and teaches his followers how to live a well-spent life, good, decent, honorable. The human goal is not fame or fortune, far from it, but the daily practice of virtue, so that virtue will increase till the person is filled with a glowing awareness of proper values and behavior, and thereby is most unlikely to bend and fall into the snares of lust, greed, and other sense-bound temptations. The theological has been removed, but not the supernatural, for the human setting out on life's quest towards goodness and virtue must always submit to God's will and laws. He must never cease seeking God's aid and mercy. Pythagoras places huge responsibility on human shoulders, and yet he never requires a human to go it alone.

The verses from four to forty are filled with specifics that do not require an angel's wings to accomplish. Pythagoras' followers should honor his father and mother, then his nearest relatives. He must first obey God's law, then the law of his parents. If he is fortunate to earn wealth, he must never practice avarice towards his parents. He must seek to be friends with all mankind, or at least with all those who practice virtue. Piety will aid these friendships, which should be preserved at all

costs. This leads to an excellent Pythagorean maxim: friendship is virtue.

Hierocles makes useful remarks on the child-parent relationship. What if the parents are not good, worthy people? What if the parents avoid the practice of virtue? What then? Hierocles insists the child must dig deeply into his parents' characters for whatever good is there, and surely some good, at least a small speck of good, will be found. Let the child focus fully and reverently on that newly discovered good, and seek to honor his parents that way. He thereby will have kept the Pythagorean maxim, and he will have significantly improved himself in doing so.

Pythagoras moves on to denouncing vices, which he refers to as passions: gluttony, sloth, lust, anger. Above all, let reason rule. He did not have to travel to Egypt to learn that. Hierocles emphasizes how these vices inter-relate, meaning a person filled with lust is likely to turn angry, or an angry person might seriously overeat with several bottles of wine. This is not profound, but useful.

Similarly, Pythagoras warns against committing shameful acts, either alone or with others. Hierocles emphasizes how private shameful acts—he provides no examples—can be more harmful than we might imagine. Above all, respect thyself. Polonius' departing words to his son come to mind. It is good advice to tell someone to come in out of the rain, especially without an umbrella, but why write this down, as if carved in marble, with reverent commentary?

The reader might be wondering just exactly did Pythagoras learn during his twenty-two years in Egypt or his lifetime of wandering. Verses thirteen through sixteen strongly advise men to observe Justice in all actions. Prudence and

Justice are the highest virtues. Hierocles might capitalize them, but he is far from instilling them with the divine radiance of Platonic Forms. Pythagoras has found virtues to offset his vices. He briefly encourages courage, temperance, liberality. He wants people to be good, and at last has a reason that does not provide yet another platitude—it is the Destiny of all men to die and, yes, an afterlife exists, where all men will be judged on how well they have practiced the *Golden Verses*.

Pythagoras has at last burst forth as a theological thinker, and perhaps no one would have nodded his head with more intellectual understanding than Ficino. Pythagoras and his commentator next make a sustained effort to deal with problems of suffering that good people inevitably endure. A deeper philosopher would have plunged in to seek the irremediable causes of evil. But Pythagoras is not profound, only highly influential. Otherwise we would not pay so much attention to him.

Pythagoras, in verses seventeen to twenty, gets caught in his own contradictions in his brave attempt to understand suffering. Above all, God is the principle of good, ultimate good, and nothing in any layer of creation can change that. Because of God's infinite powers, "nothing that exists is referred to chance." The quote belongs to Hierocles, but is quite in keeping with his philosopher.

An obvious dilemma results. If God maintains all this infinite, widespread goodness, then suffering on the human scale should never exist, especially not to people who are models of virtue. Yet it does. Of course it does. Everyday we see that it does. The wondrous child is struck by a fatal disease. The hardworking father suffers a stroke that paralyzes the left

side of his body and destroys important parts of his memory. The loving mother dies in childbirth.

If a loving, omnipotent God allows these events to happen, then He cannot be both loving and omnipotent. Pythagoras never faces this question squarely, though few believers in the Deity have ever done so. Pythagoras finds his answer in a supernal abstraction from the ancient world, called Divine Fortune. All the tragic mishaps that good people endure is caused by Divine Fortune, that and only that. It remains odd that Pythagoras actually felt this weak-kneed explication would comfort people. Father got struck by lightning and died, leaving behind a wife and seven children, but this sad violent act was caused by Divine Fortune and so no one should trouble themselves too much about it. Hierocles does little better. He suggests the victims should not pine away in anguish but seek to remedy the problem. This might almost be insulting to good people who have undergone real tragedy. It is like Hierocles is providing a self-help book to people who are beyond help. The lack of God's interest or compassion is particularly galling.

Because this is by far the weakest part of Pythagoras' program, we have stressed it. Our analysis might explain why Pythagoras never truly competed with Christianity, or why the *Golden Verses* last great audience was the Renaissance. The author of these verses is far less a thinker than Thrice-Great Hermes, nor is he worthy to fasten Plato's sandals. Somehow Ficino must have sensed all this, and yet the great antiquity of Pythagoras caused him to hold that mighty name in reverent respect. As we have often mentioned, throughout the Renaissance, the older the rediscovered thinker, the more highly he was regarded.

The *Golden Verses* twenty-one to forty-five provide more practical, down-to-earth instruction on how to lead a good life. Think before acting. Hard to disagree with that. A person will eventually be afflicted by his own foolish actions. Also obvious. Eat properly and exercise regularly. Avoid lying and causing envy. Do all things in moderation. This maxim will remind the reader of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is a lengthy book that provides many specific examples of how a wise person will learn to act in moderation. Aristotle is so brilliantly incisive and thorough that he does not need a commentary, though we must give Pythagoras credit that he seeks to stress the same point.

Pythagoras also makes two statements that are found in the New Testament. It does not matter how many riches a man gathers if he ends up losing his immortal soul in the process. Pythagoras is at his best when he bears the immortality of the soul in mind. He adds: to be good is to be happy, and to be good is to be with God.

The follower of the *Golden Verses* should carefully review them each night before falling asleep. This includes thoroughly reviewing your day. Fortunately you do not need to review any commentary.

Verses forty-five through forty-eight contain basic numerology, nothing original. For example, four and nine have special powers because they are the squares of smaller numbers. Even a math major would hurry through this section. This would be an ideal place to introduce the music of the spheres, but it never happens.

Verses forty-eight to fifty-one leave numerology and return to platitudes about praying to God. It is hard to argue

against these words of advice, though a modern child in Sunday school could just as easily have made them.

Pythagoras lifts himself to a higher plane with the next two verses. He insists cosmic order exists, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, and all objects in the universe are basically alike and shall not be hid from the observer. Could Pythagoras be talking of atomism, a half millennium before Lucretius? Hierocles does not pick up on this, and it does seem most unlikely. Pythagoras seems incapable of such a specific scientific thought, and yet these verses fifty-two and fifty-three show the kind of vague, all-wise, supernal statements that have given him long-lasting glory as a sage. The reader might not know what Pythagoras is talking about, but the great man surely does. After all, he did study those twenty-years in Egypt, the source of all spiritual wisdom, at least before Jerusalem.

In verses fifty-four to sixty, Pythagoras contradicts himself, and now proclaims man is the cause of his own misfortunes. Whatever the harsh calamity, man has nobody to blame but himself. It never occurs to Hierocles that these *Golden Verses* might have two authors, nor that his single author is being especially cruel. Instead Hierocles finds himself talking about Plato's theories of misfortune—if only man knew more, he would behave so much better, and thereby life would be so much more pleasant for him. Hierocles has provided a much watered-down original of Plato's elaborate, complex thought.

A passage from Hierocles should be quoted, for though it does little to explain the remedy for man's misfortune, it is similar to Ficino's concept of the soul.

For the Essence of man, holding the middle
place between the Beings that always

contemplate God and those that are incapable of contemplating Him, may raise itself upwards towards the one, or debase and sink itself down towards the other, having by reason of its amphibious nature an equal propensity to take the divine or brutal resemblance accordingly as it receives or rejects the understanding or the Good Spirit.

This passage might be too simplistic for Ficino, perhaps much too simplistic, but it shows the human soul in constant active motion, a cornerstone of the Florentine's theology. It is also as interesting as Hierocles is likely to get.

If all else fails, Pythagoras decides to pray directly to God and he does so at the opening of verses sixty-one to sixty-six. He provides the Deity with the name Jupiter. Hierocles is quick to point out this shows no lack of reverence, for Jupiter is a symbol of the all-wise, omnipotent God. Hence Pythagoras is standing on very solid ground. We quote the six verses of his prayer:

Great Jupiter, Father of Men, you would deliver them all from the evils that oppress them, if you would show them what is the Daimon of whom they make use.

But take courage, the race of men is divine. Sacred Nature reveals to them the most hidden Mysteries.

If she impart to thee her secrets, thou wilt easily perform all the things which I have ordained thee, and healing they soul, thou wilt

deliver it from these evils, from all these afflictions.

Pythagoras talks about “hidden mysteries.” Certainly this passage would be abundantly hopeful if we only knew what those mysteries were. Even after reading Hierocles, we are left without a hint, and this indicates he had no idea either. He merely repeats all the previous advice about avoiding vices and excessive passions. Perhaps this will lead to the mysteries, but Hierocles does not say. This quote from Pythagoras is reminiscent of alchemical texts, which hold forth great promise without ever showing how to get there.

We will close our account of Pythagoras and Hierocles with quotations, because their abundant spirituality, a verbal exaltation, cannot be paraphrased, and reading them might help the reader grasp the prolonged reverence that was given to them. We start with Pythagoras.

And when, after having divested thyself of thy mortal body, thou arrivest in the most pure Aether, thus shalt be a God, immortal, incorruptible, and death shall have no more dominion over thee.

The sage closes with another, firmer promise of the afterlife. This might be the one area he writes about that we cannot fault him for lack of details. A long stay in Egypt cannot teach him everything.

Hierocles immediately responds to these two final verses with his own rhapsody, which provides a faith and summation in all that has gone before. We provide a generous quote before moving on to our second commentator.

Behold the most glorious end of all our labours! Behold, as Plato says, the glorious combat and the great hope that is proposed to us! Behold the most perfect fruit of Philosophy! This is the greatest work, the most excellent achievement of the Art of Love, that mysterious Art which raises all souls to Divine Good and establishes them therein and delivers them from afflictions here below, as from the obscure dungeon of mortal life. It exalts to the Celestial Splendours and places in the Islands of the Blest all who have walked in the ways which the foregoing rules have taught them. For them and them alone is reserved the inestimable reward of deification, it not being permitted for any to be adopted into the rank of the Gods, but for him alone who has acquired for his soul virtue and truth, and for his spiritual chariot, purity.

Hierocles takes a long time before talking about love, but we are pleased he finally got there.

Our second commentator on the *Golden Verses* is Fabre D'Olivet, a Frenchman, who lived from 1768 to 1828. He wrote in French, and we use the translation by Nayan Louise Redfield. We should note this volume was published by Samuel Weiser, Inc. The Weiser press has a long, imposing list of books on occult subjects, its only specialty. This list can include the bizarre and far-fetched, but also genuine texts useful to scholars, as this D'Olivet volume. A student of Renaissance magic should carefully look through the Weiser listing. A number of genuine alchemical texts can be found there.

D'Olivet uses the *Golden Verses* as a springboard for his wide-ranging mind. He has delved into many areas of knowledge, and he is eager to show them, even if at times they lead him far astray from Pythagoras. D'Olivet is a different sort than Hierocles, who never dared wander from Pythagoras. For D'Olivet, the main subject will always be D'Olivet, and he writes and thinks well enough to make that work. He was a noted figure for the poets in the third volume of our Ficino series, and that is why we include him.

D'Olivet approaches the *Golden Verses* rather like an alchemist. He requires three stages: preparation, purification, perfection. But these are emotional states, not chemical. D'Olivet believes deeply in the purification of the person, and believes the Chinese are especially gifted at this inner attainment. Otherwise the great civilization of China could not have lasted four thousand years. Europe, by comparison, is only a few hundred years old. We do not know where D'Olivet got his figures, but his great leap from Pythagoras to China is a cornerstone of his style. D'Olivet gladly takes his mind as its own subject. If Pythagoras can set off sparks, D'Olivet is ready to let those sparks fly. Pythagoras was a great traveler, but he never got to China or, as far as we know, made any comment about it. D'Olivet has taken us there alone.

Pythagoras does talk, rather vaguely, about all things being alike. This statement could mean any one of a number of things, but D'Olivet chooses to write about atomic theory, which he believes was first contemplated and discussed at the time of Homer's Troy. Lucretius and his famous theory of the atom would come much later. D'Olivet does not support himself with footnotes or a critical apparatus. His voice is its

own authority. If Achilles pondered the atomic structure of his shield, then so be it.

D'Olivet enters the all-embracing problem of evil by insisting humans have a free will. This was never an issue for Pythagoras, but D'Olivet takes it most seriously. He has firmly entered the Christian era, leaving his sage far behind, and feels no call whatsoever to look back.

D'Olivet never provides a satisfactory answer to the cause of evil—what philosopher has?—but he insists men do evil acts of their own volition. He enters a Christian heresy at the time of Augustine, fourteen centuries from when he writes, and nine centuries after Pythagoras lived. If D'Olivet has something to say, the time frame is not important. What matters is the essential need of his message.

Augustine preached that all humans were deeply stained with original sin at the moment of birth, and thereby had a natural propensity towards evil. D'Olivet could not have found anything more unnatural. Pelagius arose as Augustine's primary contemporary opponent, and rigorously denied this horrid new doctrine of original sin. D'Olivet could not have agreed more. Augustine had the political means—he also wrote very well—to defeat Pelagius, who is remembered, if at all, as a heretic. D'Olivet adamantly disagreed. If original sin ever slightly interfered with human free will, then this Augustinian concept was nonsense, and so D'Olivet thought it was. The free will must forever be free and unsullied. This will not explain evil at large—earthquakes, volcanoes near small villages, Caligula's madness—but it will usually help to explain individual self-willed acts of evil, and that was all D'Olivet was getting at.

Obviously we have moved a long way from Pythagoras. What we have is D'Olivet writing commentary on Augustine—

he also intensely disliked his own contemporary Napoleon—or better yet, D'Olivet commenting on a previous passage of his own writing. He imitates Dante. He makes a list of the ancients who ended up in hell, a miniature Dante's Inferno and yet only one man's creation. He recounts Plato's human division into instinct, soul, and mind, and declares that hierarchy is a satisfactory justification for the caste systems in India and China. D'Olivet might have swiftly changed his mind if he found himself on the lower end of one of those caste systems, wondering where his next drink of safe water was coming from. His was a strange mind, the rare European with an interest in eastern countries and yet with so little intelligent to say about them.

In one page, D'Olivet can mention Jesus, Krishna, Zoroaster, Jacob Boehme. He was not a frivolous namedropper, for his writing gives solid evidence that he truly studied these people. He was a man of faith who wore many hats. Maybe a commentator on Pythagoras should be fully aware of other sages. Maybe he should be a sage himself—D'Olivet falls short of that because he cannot carry a possibly profound idea home to a full and satisfactory conclusion. He is not a philosopher, though has certainly read philosophers. He is not a sage, not even close, though he could probably distinguish the sage from the charlatan. He is not a charlatan. The overriding positive quality to his writing is sincerity. If he takes himself too seriously, his reader does not have to. He is an entertainment, an engaging and convivial companion. If a great romantic poet came across his efforts, he would not go away displeased.

Chapter Fifteen:

Macrobius, the Ultimate Commentator

Macrobius lived and wrote near the end of the fourth century. His minor works are so minor that even scholars of Macrobius might not have worked their way through them. His lengthy treatise on Virgil's single use of a single preposition is a classic case of a work well worth forgetting. It might even have put Virgil to sleep. Rather, of all people, it would have put Virgil to sleep. Yet Macrobius wrote an extended commentary on a short work by Cicero that was one of the two most influential and widely read books of the middle ages. The other was Boethius' *Consolations of Philosophy*. Of course we exclude the Scriptures and Bede from this ranking.

Curiously both Macrobius and Boethius showed no signs of Christian belief in the works that made them so famous. Macrobius is steeped in Neo-Platonism, and provides a thorough study of that subject. He lived in an age when writers put together handbooks which provided concise accounts of difficult subjects, and an author could compose a handbook on classical Greek philosophy or Virgil without ever having read the authors themselves, certainly not in their original languages.

All too often the authors of handbooks merely copied from other handbooks, and sadly, these handbooks were often the only sources the medieval mind had of the antique world. The handbooks thereby provided a limited but necessary bridge from the fall of Rome through the dark ages to the genuine revival of classical learning, which culminates in Ficino. The most widely read handbook authors include Martianus, Capella, Chaladius, Cassiodorus, Isadore of Seville, and Macrobius. These were not listed in order of merit, because the handbook authors they copied from would also need to be added to the roll call and that would be little short of impossible. Good fortune has chosen these few for a dubious fame. When monks sat quietly copying manuscripts by candlelight, they were household names.

We need emphasize Boethius' *Consolations of Philosophy* is not a handbook, not in any way, but an original work of philosophy. It holds all the virtues of brevity. Boethius wrote his *Consolations* while sitting in a prison cell, awaiting execution. He created an all-wise Lady Philosophy whom he sought consolation from. She is not another name for the Virgin Mary, and she has no Christian content. She is entirely pagan. Since Christians were executing Boethius, he did not look to their belief system for comfort. With his inevitable moment rapidly approaching, he created his own belief system, a remarkable achievement under any circumstances. His story had great appeal to the middle ages and long afterwards. Boethius wrote in Latin. In England, Chaucer made a prose translation of the *Consolations*, as did Queen Elizabeth two centuries later. For an English writer not to have read Boethius, that would have been unlikely.

Boethius' message, as with all true philosophy, cannot be paraphrased. But he does make wise, incisive comments about the vanity of earthly longings, with the full assurance of a better life awaiting him. He is specifically not talking about a Christian heaven, but multitudes of Christians read him anyway and took deep comfort.

Macrobius was devotedly read for many reasons, not least for the short work of Cicero's on which he writes commentary. Macrobius uses seventeen times more words than Cicero. Renaissance humanists admired Cicero for the wise clarity of his Latin prose, but this was not true for the middle ages, which composed a Latin the Renaissance would find barbarous. Perhaps if Macrobius had composed a purer Latin closer to Cicero's, his popularity would have endured throughout the Renaissance. If Ficino had translated Macrobius into a vibrant, lucid Latin—barbarous Latin into humanist Latin—then Macrobius would have joined the several other Neo-Platonists of late Roman times whom Ficino brought back to life and kept there.

This was not to be Macrobius' good fortune. What severely diminished his readership was Ficino. Why should anyone read a handbook of Neo-Platonism, no matter how compelling, when the original authors, the great masters of the subject—Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblichus, Pseudo-Dionysius—are readily available in Ficino's expert translations with brilliant commentary? Macrobius had met his match and the day of the handbook was over. Macrobius should not feel too badly, for he did maintain wide popularity for a millennium—and how many writers can say that? Try making a list. It will not be a long one.

Consequently, Macrobius was a Neo-Platonist with special qualities—the schoolboy Ficino almost surely studied

him—and we need inquire why his handbook stood out over all others. The main reason, which requires no rare critical insight, is the sheer beauty and wisdom of the Cicero piece that Macrobius used as the source of his commentary.

Macrobius uses the standard format of commentary; he quotes a section from Cicero in chronological order, and then explicates. Macrobius often brings in material that would have bewildered Cicero, and seems to enjoy showing off just how much Neo-Platonism and its antecedent subjects he knows. This extra virtuosity, if we can call it that, is allowed the commentator. In theory, he can write on as long as he likes, just as long as he makes it interesting. Since Macrobius was often the primary source (from Cicero) of the planetary system, Pythagorean numerology, and especially of terrestrial geography, he could not help but be interesting. He could not help but hold his reader enthralled.

Cicero's work does require commentary, especially to readers who had little or no knowledge of Neo-Platonism. Cicero lived from 106 to 43 B.C., and so the term Neo-Platonism would have meant nothing to his original readers. Plotinus, the founder of the system, was more than three centuries away. We cannot be sure of Plotinus' dates, but he died in the final quarter of the third century of the common era. If he read Cicero's short work, Plotinus would have been strongly influenced, but no evidence for this exists. But Cicero's offering had achieved great popularity during Plotinus' lifetime, when Rome still stood firm and strong, so we are not overreaching to make the educated guess that Plotinus looked it over. Plotinus was not a handbook writer—he saw no need to preserve anything—but an original philosopher of lasting value.

If Cicero obviously could not be a Neo-Platonic, regardless of all the resemblances, he was powerfully inspired by Plato. Several dialogues could be listed, but most notably *The Republic*, Plato's long, sustained effort to describe an ideal political system, which closes in Book Ten with the famous myth of Er, when Er's soul enters the afterlife and faces divine judgement for the good and failures of his actions on earth below. Cicero was profoundly impressed with all of this. He wrote his own full-length description of a good government system. But Plato was Greek and dealt with an ideal system. Cicero forever remained a Roman, and instead of a government that existed only on paper, he described the Roman republic as he actually knew it.

Cicero would still follow Plato in contemplating an afterlife. In imitation of Plato's myth of Er, Cicero composed "Scipio's Dream," a short treatise on the afterlife, which became the most popular short work Cicero ever produced. It was about "Scipio's Dream" that Macrobius chose to write his allegory and he could not have made a better choice.

Scipio is a young military man with great deeds ahead of him. He is the grandson of Scipio Africanus, a great military hero in Roman history. It is important we do not get these two Scipios confused. Macrobius was very careful about that. The young Scipio has a father named Aemilius Paulus. Care must be taken while Cicero sets up his dream structure. Both grandfather and father have passed out of this life, while young Scipio is very much alive and destined to stay so for a good many years. He falls asleep and dreams—over ninety percent of Cicero's piece is the young man's first person account of this dream, where he is visited by his illustrious grandfather, then his impressive father. Of course the young man is not aware he is

dreaming, for everything that he sees and hears is all too real to him. He will not say much, for his grandfather and father have much to say. These two older men are walking encyclopedias (or handbooks) of essential knowledge. Before they take their leave of the young man, they want to be certain he knows all he has to.

What follows is basic Platonic knowledge that somehow takes a strong Neo-Platonic form. If a reader is truly interested in these philosophies, let him read Plato and Plotinus. Macrobius is no longer needed as an intermediary, and yet by an odd twist of fate, Macrobius has been largely necessary for the preservation of “Scipio’s Dream.” Many copyist monks tired of Macrobius, understandably, and focused on “Scipio’s Dream,” making several careful copies. Macrobius had been set aside, but “Scipio’s Dream” could not have increased in numbers without him. Of course many monks found Macrobius utterly fascinating and carefully copied every word.

Young Scipio’s lessons are both practical and cosmic, and deal with this life and the hereafter. His two relatives move him to an awesome seat high above the planetary system and near the Milky Way galaxy—Cicero was far from a precise astronomer—where young Scipio can learn cosmic matters from a correct perspective. He learns the correct order of the planets, with the earth lodged without movement in the center, by actually looking down on them in the correct order. He learns the traditional oft-repeated music of the spheres by becoming literature’s first person to be close enough to hear the music. The sun is a planet and provides its own light which reflects off the moon, which orbits the earth, like the sun and all other planets. The distance between Saturn and Jupiter is impressive, especially when the viewer is in a position to look

down on them. The young Scipio never does see Saturn's rings nor Jupiter's four small satellites, though we can be sure they are up there anyway.

Young Scipio might be flying high in space, but his feet are firmly rooted on solid ground. If he wishes a noble place in the afterlife, he can do no better than practice virtues, like his grandfather and father, the ultimate role models. The influence of Plato's *Republic* now settles in. The virtue of fine statecraft is a splendid virtue, which the gods will always highly reward. To better the community is to better mankind, and to better the commonwealth is to better your soul. The all-importance of the soul can never be stressed too greatly, for the soul not the body ventures into the glorious rewards of the afterlife. Suicide is never permitted to speed entry into the afterlife, because a good Roman will always have many vital duties in his hallowed commonwealth to contribute. Death comes in the god's good time, not man's. Plato probably would have liked that. Humility is an essential virtue, and yes, Plato would have liked that too.

We mentioned earlier in this chapter how Macrobius devoted a long treatise to a single preposition used one time in Virgil. This tells us, without the possibility of serious doubt, that Macrobius regarded Virgil's verse as a sacred text, like a pre-Christian evangelist, or like an evangelist with no need for an adjective that might be pejorative. Macrobius had turned himself into a Talmudic scholar to Virgil's Torah. If this sounds wildly exaggerated, the fault lies with Macrobius. How much juice could he get out of a single pronoun? What ever was he thinking? He does not pursue Cicero in such scrupulous detail, or this chapter would be 900 pages long, but the consistent reverence of his commentary indicates he regarded "Scipio's Dream" as a sacred text.

Macrobius might not feel that way about all of Cicero as he did with Virgil, but with this one work, he felt he was moving across hallowed ground. He was a man who could place firm trust in questionable circumstances. He might actually have believed young Scipio floated without wings above the known cosmos. His dream reads far more like a true visionary experience than an ordinary dream. In his commentary, Macrobius will list the different kinds of dreams that a person might encounter. Certain dreams are vivid variations of truth, and this would explicate young Scipio. Macrobius' extensive section on dreams became the standard textbook on dreams throughout the middle ages. This powerful influence could not have been entirely lost on future ages. If Shakespeare and Marlowe's characters have disturbing dreams, they just might have a few last vestiges in mind—recall they lived under a queen who carefully translated the philosophical dreamlike passages in Boethius.

Macrobius' largest impact upon medieval times was not astronomy but geography. This holds true even though readers often perused only the long astronomical passages in the Commentary. Sometimes the astronomical passages were marked off by special dividing lines, for they were indeed popular. But medieval minds with a strong interest in distant skies had other sources besides Macrobius. He might have been more convincing when writing about the music of the spheres than other authors—Plato's *Timaeus* certainly never went into it in such detail—but other sources did exist, perhaps lacking all the vivid cosmological details, but nevertheless providing the basics, and in an age when a twelve-hour trip was slow and arduous, a vague dreamlike trip from Mars to Jupiter might not be all that interesting.

The geography in Cicero, thoroughly discussed by Macrobius, was an altogether different matter. The global maps provided in the Commentary were the most complete and detailed that medieval minds had access to. Not all of this precious information was wrong, though much was. The medieval centuries had no possible way of discriminating—Macrobius was 350 years before Vasco da Gama sailed down the western coast of Africa—and the maps and their explications became, if not sacred texts, at least deeply believed. Cicero was a towering figure, and what other source was there? Chaucer's pilgrims took an endless time getting only part way across England, and Cicero certainly knew immeasurably more than they did.

The ancient world always knew more, far more. The golden age of knowledge had existed back about then. A great library had once been in Alexandria, though destroyed by flames; medieval people could not date that fire, nor find Alexandria on a map—maps were far from their specialty—but they assumed much of the golden age had gone up in those flames. That was a satisfactory explanation of all that powerful lost knowledge the ancients once gloried under. “Scipio’s Dream” had survived, if not those flames, then the horrid barbarian invasions, and so medieval Europe had better pay close attention to it and hear whatever Macrobius had to say.

What Cicero and Macrobius had to tell them was geography. The earth was a round globe, a firm forthright statement that ended beliefs earth was a giant flat board surrounded on all sides by water. No, earth was a globe and surrounded on all sides by air. This was somehow comforting. A person could no longer sail off the edge of the earth, though after a short distance in any direction, he still would have no

idea where he was going. Columbus would later decide to find out exactly where he was going, and yes, that is another story, but a solid belief in a round globe had to be established for this monumental story to be undertaken.

Macrobius divided his globe into a series of horizontal lines that divided his earth into equal slices or proportions. Slices of a pie is not a bad analogy. The smallest slices are the farthest north and farthest south, which nicely balance each other. These small slices were freezing cold, intolerably cold, impossible for human habitation. Next the globe is divided in the center by what would later be called the equator. Above and below the equator are temperate zones, marked off neatly by more horizontal lines of equal distance north and south from the equator. Maps are much more difficult to write about than look at. A virtue of Macrobius' maps is the medieval viewer would not require high literacy to understand, to grasp the basics, not if the overall plan was explained carefully.

The two temperate zones are suitable for human life, and so of course humans do live there in abundant numbers. Neither the gods nor Macrobius would have had it any other way. All humans that ancient Rome or medieval Europe would encounter lived in the northern temperate zone. These humans can never possibly have contact with their similar counterparts on the southern zone, for too many huge geological obstructions stand in the way. Reading Macrobius would not fill potential explorers with confidence, for he declares large colonies of humans are trapped into isolation all over the habitable globe, isolated by a wide variety of steep mountains, raging streams, endless deserts—these details are not Macrobius' strong point, but he is repeatedly insistent that vast masses of land and water exist that no human could ever hope to cross.

This isolation has a virtuous effect on young Scipio, who hears it from his older relatives, though lacking any maps or charts. The young man was apparently smart enough not to require that. Macrobius was correct in assuming his millennium would cherish all the maps he could give them, and he must also have assumed his readers would absorb the same virtue as young Scipio. The virtue is humility, or the vanity of human wishes as expressed in Ecclesiastes.

The grandfather was a famous man in the Roman empire, but now he explains how this empire is only very little of the global areas suitable for human habitation. Hence even at the height of his prestige and glory, which was not all that long ago, the overwhelming majority of people on earth had never heard of him. Looking down at earth from the top of the cosmos, the imperial city of Rome, for all its might and influence, does not seem more than the tiniest dot—if even that. A head-bowed humility is obviously required.

But, the grandfather has more, and one would like to know Cicero's source for this original geologic thesis of hopelessness. The first great English geologists at the close of the eighteenth century would have known this, but surely not Cicero. The grandfather remarks that a great Roman general, like himself, might be remembered for a few generations, but earth is always subject to sudden, all-powerful, destructive catastrophes, like a tremendous earthquake that could turn Rome and its environs into nothing but rubble and small stones, and if not that, a gigantic flood will bury Rome's tallest buildings under several feet of water. What makes this especially sad is Rome could be swallowed alive in a monstrous earthquake, and yet no one in the majority of the earth's population would know—humans in the other zones would not

have the faintest idea. So what purpose glory? What reason fame?

Did Cicero get this catastrophic conception from the Old Testament? It seems unlikely, but we shall never know. His notions of utter calamity were widely accepted in a medieval Europe that knew precisely what the great old Roman was talking about—for they knew the plague, the full horrors of the plague, and nothing Cicero thought up in his dream was ever as frightening as that.

Chapter Sixteen:

Plotinus, the Greatest Platonist Since Plato

Ficino translated Plotinus (205-270) with commentary, and so we must be involved with him. He is well worth reading, but a deep bow of appreciation must always be given to the modern translator and editor. The Jesuit, Father Elmer O'Brien, S.J., has provided both those services for contemporary readers required to approach Plotinus in English. Father O'Brien opens his useful volume, *The Essential Plotinus*, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis, 1964, with an extended lament of the translator's problems.

Plotinus is the most difficult of any recognized author to translate. The Greek that he uses is not of the best. His way of using it borders, at times, on the contemptuous. Add to that the fact that he came to composition very late in life and composed with an unreflecting swiftness that was the astonishment of his contemporaries and refused to reread what he had composed with a disinterestedness—or concern for his failing eyesight—that was their admiration, and it will be seen that the translator has more than a fair share of problems on his hands ... A knowledge

of Greek is not sufficient if one would translate Plotinus aright. Nor does one's knowledge of his thought suffice.

Father O'Brien obviously needs some help, which he finds in the "books, monographs, and articles" on Plotinus that have appeared since the second world war. The good father used this material "without a blush."

Ficino had no such help, which makes his achievement of bringing Plotinus to the Renaissance all the more extraordinary. If Ficino wanted assistance—and it is debatable how much of this material was available to him—he had to look back to philosophers with strong Platonic tendencies in the closing centuries of the Roman Empire. He did have full access to Iamblichus and Pseudo-Dionysius, and yet he single-handedly brought these two thinkers into the Renaissance, just as he had done with Plato. Plotinus also joins that list. We shall provide a separate chapter on Pseudo-Dionysius. It becomes a safe though impressive statement that Renaissance philosophy, and thereby Elizabethan thought, would have been profoundly different if Ficino had not lived.

Plotinus has also presented editorial problems. As he did not trouble to reread a sentence, and thereby not rewrite one, he also did not prepare his numerous treatises and tracts for coherent publication. This was left to his most devoted follower Porphyry (232-305 A.D.), who divided his master's works into categories of nine works each—hence the famous title *Enneads*, which has been associated with Plotinus since Porphyry set his hand to editing. Of course the nine has a mystical, numerological significance. Otherwise Porphyry chose the nine at random, and philosophers honoring Pythagoras and the music of the spheres did not think that way. Plotinus often divides

creation in triads, and dividing each triad into three will produce nine. This will not appear entirely far-fetched as we proceed to study Plotinus.

Father O'Brien, working his way through the *Enneads* by translation, divided his material into ten essays. We do not look for numerological content in Father O'Brien. But O'Brien presents a problem inherent to all Plotinus editors; Plotinus manages to get the gist of his entire philosophy in each treatise, and so each treatise becomes a matter of emphasis or overall organization. This might not make full sense till a person sits down to read Plotinus, but we can support O'Brien and provide a preview of what to expect. Plotinus deals primarily with spiritual or non-corporeal dimensions of creation, and so ultimately words shall fail him. Plotinus would likely argue that spiritual and non-corporeal words do not quite say it. That might help to explain why Plotinus never reread—he could not say it better because it could not be said better. Spiritual language works out that way; you do your best and move on.

Plotinus is about movement. His subject is human beings. That can easily be overlooked with the constant outpouring of spiritual language, or rather language struggling to convey the spiritual. The human's primary or perhaps entire value to himself is his steadfast pursuit of the One. This remark is the thesis statement of Plotinus' philosophy, which could just as well be called theology. Do note we have not gotten past the main thesis and we are already having trouble with words. A Plotinus dictionary does not exist. It might not cheer readers to learn the only way to grasp his terms is to struggle with more terms, which hopefully do reflect upon each other and thereby bring out ever increasing shades of meaning. We do not want to

deal with a Plotinus term all on its own, like that intriguing One in the thesis.

We must start with the One, for all roads start and end there. Plotinus would be quick to point out roads is a weak metaphor and we could not disagree. This criticism could be made of all our struggling content, so we have satisfactorily humbled ourselves—Plotinus would nod in appreciation—and we shall pass on further criticisms. The follower of one of the world's great monotheistic faiths might assume the One is their one true God. The capital letters cohere, but Plotinus did not follow these faiths. He definitely does not have Yahweh nor the Our Father in mind. Allah would not exist for over four centuries. What then? Plotinus' One has no personality, nothing slightly anthropomorphic, nothing that could possibly be connected with a human trait. We now enter the sublime yet confusing world of the Plotinus paradox. The One contains no traits, qualities, movement, life, form, location—and yet the One is the ultimate source of all these, without ever approaching them, without ever a passing thought. The One is no thought and all thought. The One does not think, cannot think, and yet no thought could exist without it.

The One is Good. This will be the most specific statement Plotinus can make about the One. The One is not only Good, but all Good, all virtue all the time. What about evil? How does Plotinus define evil, that all-important topic? If a human person, or horse or star or canary, is far away from the Good, or the One, then that person has surrounded himself with evil. Plotinus does not take his definition any further. This will provide little help in understanding Iago or Goneril, but be patient, Plotinus will eventually provide insight into Shakespeare.

We cannot remain on the One without the famous Plotinus triad, which adds two useful terms; the One, the Intelligence, the World Soul. Like the One, the other two traits are not human based, but the human goal is to strive ever towards them. The Intelligence is similar to the Demiurge or Master Craftsman in Plato's *Timaeus*. This and much that follows should not be surprising, since Plotinus always considered himself a devout Platonist. Hence the Intelligence is the source or creator of the Platonic Ideas, including symmetry and harmony, these latter Ideas being the source of the Idea of Beauty, a primary subject with Plotinus. If topics seem to be toppling all over each other, this resembles Plotinus' method; recall Father O'Brien declared each Plotinus treatise contains the basic concepts of his entire philosophy, and so we must expect overlapping and repetition. Our goal is not to make this practice ourselves.

Early Christians in the Roman Empire believed Plotinus' triad might be an echo or supernal imprint of the Christian Trinity. Plotinus never would have considered such a notion, though long after his passing this would allow him Christian followers. This happens most notably in Pseudo-Dionysius, an important figure for Ficino and our study. Plotinus never mentions Jesus in any of his writings. He did not debate the Nazarene. He never considered him. Plotinus also spends little or no time on ethics or personal morality. The human's one goal is to be Platonic and mystical—rise and reach the One, through all the varied stages, with the model teacher being Plato's Diotima in *The Symposium*, a pagan sage for an ever active cosmos not only outside traditional monotheism but unaware of it.

The World Soul is a steep level below the Intelligence, and functions as the great transition device of the Plotinus system. The human soul—small s—must make its start toward the One by uniting with the World Soul. What Plotinus has given us is a ladder, a hierarchy, with many steps still to come. But the hierarchy concept coheres with Shakespeare, who uses various supernal hierarchies throughout his plays. The concept is given Christian intensity by Pseudo-Dionysius, and was often called the Great Chain of Being in Elizabethan England. From whatever source Shakespeare derived this concept, the origin were Ficino's translations. In our world, all roads lead to Florence.

Both the World Soul and the human soul have higher, middle, and lower parts. The triads upon triads appear here. When the human commences Diotima's upward mystical path, the highest part of the human soul must meet and connect with the lowest part of the World Soul. Obviously words cannot express the exaltation felt by the human, who progresses upward through the two remaining stages of the World Soul, till connecting with the Intelligence and repeating the process. Now the only true human ecstasy remains—the merging with the One. This is rare, incredibly rare, but apparently always worth the attempt or process.

What actually does the human soul do during this process, Diotima's ascent? Plotinus uses the word contemplation, a favorite word of Ficino in his epochal *Platonic Theology*. Ficino's work strives to prove the immortality of the human soul, which Plotinus never doubted or considered to doubt. Plotinus expands the use of contemplation, like no other philosopher. All is contemplation, including what beasts, insects, and plants require to stay alive and function. Father

O'Brien suggests Plotinus might be joking in this passage, though truly Plotinus has never seemed like a very funny fellow. Nevertheless it is a curious approach to contemplation, making it the life force at the root of trees, one root, many branches. Plotinus never explains how this applies to dogs and cows, but apparently these creatures could not live without some contact with the World Soul, who gains strength from the Intelligence, and this contact is contemplation. Ficino only used contemplation to mean a deep human meditation on a profound spiritual subject. It might be wise to stay with that. That might be why Ficino is so much easier to read.

Chapter Seventeen:

Proclus, the Philosopher of the Endless Sentences

Devoted followers of Plato most often imitated their master by composing prose in a clear, vivid, lucid style, always a joy to read. No better example of this exists than Ficino. The style is an essential part of the aspiring philosopher, and forms a vital linkage with whatever ideas are expressed, thereby becoming a part of the philosophy itself. In this instance, the style makes the man is not an empty platitude. Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius followed both Plato's ideas and style to great advantage. They served their master.

It is sad the same cannot be said for Proclus, the Greek Neo-Platonic philosopher, who lived from 410 to 485, C.E. He is sometimes called the successor because at some point in his long career he took over as head of the Platonic Academy, still in Athens. But the Academy, one of the great wonders of western culture, was on its last legs. Forty-four years after Proclus died, the Academy was shut down forever by the Emperor Justinian.

Proclus was a prolific writer. His prose is turgid, cramped, difficult to follow, sentences meandering endlessly

with no apparent end, philosophical thoughts often following the same meandering patterns with no conclusive end in sight; he lacked the gifts of metaphor, useful comparison and contrast, bright vivid images; at his best he is dry and dull, at his worst hopelessly tedious. If Emperor Justinian had struggled through several hundred pages of Proclus' prose, he might be forgiven for closing the Academy. He might be forgiven for burning it down.

We need to study Proclus, not in great depth, because Ficino took his work very seriously. Ficino had the splendid gifts of patience and generosity of spirit. He also read Proclus in the original Greek. He considered Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus a united trio of contemporary Neo-Platonists, with Plotinus by far the greatest. We strongly adhere to Ficino's judgement as our chapter on Plotinus shows. Whatever Proclus might have learned from the elder Plotinus, it was not his splendid elegance of style.

Because Porphyry wrote a book opposing Christianity, Ficino gave him little regard. Our Florentine often found the highest praises for Plato and Thrice-Great Hermes, but this never stopped him from being a devout Christian. We need never forget Ficino was a priest, though not an especially active one. Yet a priest could not have looked Porphyry straight in the eye and liked what he saw. He provided him scant attention. He showered praise and commentaries on Plotinus, all well-deserved. He struggled with the disjointed, unwieldy prose of Proclus, as all of his followers must. Ficino never doubted this sustained, intense effort was invaluable. If the ancient Roman world only produced three significant Neo-Platonists, he had better know exactly what each had to say. This will prove more challenging with Proclus than most philosophers, for the style

and the man are inseparable, and picking them apart is most difficult to do.

We will study two long, book-length, essays by Proclus: *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence and a Solution of Those Doubts*, and *On the Subsistence of Evil*. About our translators—William of Moerbeke translated Proclus' original Greek into classical Latin, which could not have been easy, and in 1833, Thomas Taylor translated this Latin into English, also not easy. Taylor was fluent in classical Greek, so we cannot be sure why he did not go to the original Proclus, other than he was not a glutton for linguistic punishment. Taylor is known as the close personal friend of William Blake, and scholars can stand on solid ground that Blake did read Taylor's translations of Plato and Platonic writers. Influences abound, and they will be discussed fully in volume three of our Ficino series. However, Blake did not see this Proclus translation, for he died in 1827, six years before Taylor published.

We shall start with *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence*. We need note Proclus at times mentions evil in this essay, but we will pass by this material, since he repeats it in his essay on evil which we will study next. Proclus repeats himself so many times that the scholar's repetition would be merciless redundancy.

Proclus invokes Plato in his opening line, and shortly afterwards, “our common leader, Hermes,” referring to Trismegistus. Proclus' essay is about Providence and we need to understand what he means by Providence. If that is all we have taken away from his difficult prose, we will have done quite well.

Providence is God. A reader of the Old Testament or the Koran must reach that conclusion; the Providence of Proclus is

God. Why? Because this providence neatly, almost too neatly, fits the Judaic or Islamic description of God. Providence knows all, causes all, and transcends all. Providence contains the two most valued Platonic Forms: the One and the Good. It contains two other magnificent Forms: Power and Will. By possessing these Forms, Providence holds those traits in the highest possible degree; Providence ceaselessly transcends the manner in which we usually think of them, then pauses to take a deep breath, then transcends some more. All possible powers or virtues belong to Providence in this same manner. Providence is Hubble's expanding universe of infinite virtues—that's a useful image, and therefore cannot truly be associated with Proclus, who either strenuously avoided them or never experienced one popping into his mind. He makes his theological points: if Providence holds such an infinity of powers, all doubts about him must be successfully resolved. We have philosophy without poetry, images without imagination, essentials without energy.

Let us quote the closing words of Proclus' essay. If the reader can fully understand it with one perusal, he is doing very well.

For of the Gods, each is a unity; but of these each possesses through participation a transcendency of union. Hence, each having something else besides unity, imitates through unity the divinity prior to itself, and from which it is suspended; but by something else, it lives according to another energy. And the summit of the essence of each is according to the one; but being subsists in each according to that which is not one (but united). This, however, being known, other particulars which have been

mentioned concerning Providence may be adapted to daemons and heroes in a secondary degree, except that in these also, in the same manner as the Divinities, unity has in some of them a mere total, but in others a more partial power. The ineffable principle of things, however, as it is more excellent than every power, so likewise it transcends Providence. But if someone should dare to assert, that it providentially attends to all things, it must be said that this is in no other way than as desirable to all things, and as that for the sake of which all things subsist, and as the cause of Providence. For the providential energies of the Gods, of all the beings posterior to the Gods, are on account of good; and this both things themselves manifest, and also Plato, as we have said in the beginning of this discussion.

So Proclus begins and ends his essay with Plato, his beloved master. Proclus needed to be quoted in depth to show how far short he falls of Plato's brilliant prose, most often in the voice of Socrates. If Socrates had to listen to Proclus, day after day, week after week, he might have been willing to take that hemlock a whole lot sooner.

Our second Proclus' essay deals with perhaps philosophy's most interesting problem, *On the Existence of Evil*. The title is not verbose, so Proclus has gotten off to a good start. But whether he knows it or not, the question he asks is profound and reverts back to his essay on providence. Jews and Moslems ponder the same question. If Providence or God is all-powerful and all-loving, why should evil exist? Not only the

evil of the Gulag and Dachau, but any evil, the bee-sting, the broken heart, the stubbed toe?

Freud was once asked how he would approach God on judgement day, and the great psychiatrist responded, “I would show the Deity the cancer-ridden body of an eight year old child and roar—how do you justify this!” More than a few people would like to know God’s answer.

Freud does not merely expect an answer, he furiously demands one. Proclus can never be so strident and forceful in approaching his God. Proclus must receive immense credit for fully admitting the undeniable existence of evil, and for understanding an explication taking in the Deity is in order. Already he has moved much farther, and yes, much more bravely, in his search for the source of evil than most philosophers, and this quiet intensity in Proclus might be what Ficino and Thomas Taylor found to admire. It is not necessary to roar at God for a well-taken point to be made.

What troubles Proclus is how evil can exist if God possesses the Platonic Form of Good. This last sentence would take Proclus five pages to express, and so the reader can never be certain he has clearly grasped Proclus’ thought. This should not be surprising since it is rare Proclus has a clear unvarnished thought.

But to analyze him the best we can, before a generous quotation, regards us to consider Proclus’ belief in hierarchies. Ficino would have strongly shared this with him. Below God, three supernal categories exist: angels, daemons, heroes. By heroes, Proclus is not talking about brave mighty warriors on the battlefield of Homer’s Troy, who are undeniably human and only human, though they do get help from unreliable gods whom Proclus does not believe in. Homer’s heroes and gods

belong in epic and myth, while Proclus' heroes belong in theology. They have human features—so do angels for that matter—but routinely perform superhuman feats. If a human is struggling with an evil—barbarians at the gate, a difficult childbirth—the heroes might be able to assist.

Proclus' weakness as a writer is he does not specify how. He can never provide a specific, illuminating example of what he refers to. He has no concept of metaphor that clarifies. He knows of no linguistic conception that clarifies. The two above examples—the barbarians and difficult childbirth—came from this author, not Proclus. As examples, they are useful, precise, necessary, for ultimately evil can only be defined by examples. If a philosopher, even a Platonist, desires to discuss evil, he requires his code of specific laws so the reader will know what he truly regards as evil, so the reader can at long last know what he is talking about. He must become Moses and Blackstone. Failing that, he inevitably fails in his efforts to convey meaning about evil.

Freud considered the horrid meaningless suffering of young children to be evil, or at least essential in discussing evil with God. But does Proclus share this view? After struggling through thousands of words of Proclus writing about evil, we have no idea. We could not even make an educated case.

In the 1960s, the French had a hideous stipulation in determining if a man had legally raped a woman or not. No matter how brutally violent the man acted out towards the woman, no matter how battered and bruised her body was, no matter how long and sharp the gleaming knife he held before her terrified eyes in forcing her to submit and let him penetrate her, no matter how foul and ugly his act—nevertheless, if he did

not ejaculate during penetration, then he could not be accused or convicted of rape.

This is just the sort of ethical travesty that an ethical philosopher should get hold of and never let go till his powerful straightforward prose, filled with dynamic explosive specifics, brings on enough sustained public outrage for the law to be changed. This is why we have philosophers. This is why we have philosophers who write about evil. If a philosopher is looking to define evil with abundant specifics, let him look to that French law. Let him roar at the French judiciary as Freud roared at God. Let him roar at God too if he wanted—that sure could not hurt. But above all, let him connect philosophy to the living, breathing entity of human life. Otherwise why be a philosopher? To pour out difficult, opaque prose like the long section we quoted? Why discuss evil if not to define evil by the cruel specifics all around us? Proclus lived in the midst of a slave society—what more evidence did he need?

For Proclus, evil is an immense abstraction. Evil is a piece in a puzzle, and the puzzle depicts an out-of-focus cloud. He has asked or admitted the correct questions about evil, but he fails to enlighten because he can never lift his topic above a vague abstraction. His puzzle is one of shifting images. Evil can only exist below the realm of God, and so God might know of evil, but he holds no responsibility for it. God cannot be held accountable for failing to comprehend and act on the cloudy puzzle. If Freud roared in God's face, the God of Proclus would be astonished, hurt, and roar right back at Freud. Nothing solved.

The puzzle is an ever-varying mixture of good and evil. Proclus insists several times—that evil cannot exist unmixed with good. Hence evil is not all that bad, for it is only a

proportionate part of good. Yet sometimes a chunk of independent evil snaps off the puzzle and functions alone, causing dire trouble and not connecting to any good. Obviously the statements in this paragraph are conflicting, and we cannot be certain Proclus is writing about one puzzle that alternates its portions of good and evil but remains intact, or a similar alternating puzzle that snaps apart sometimes, or a puzzle that neither alternates nor snaps apart.

How to tell? Re-reading Proclus will not help, for reviewing long passages of a writer who frequently repeats himself is not likely to be beneficial. Associating Proclus' good and evil with the Platonic Forms might connect with what Proclus had in mind, but we can never be certain because Proclus never mentions the Forms in this long essay. In his failure to define clearly his most basic terms, good and evil, we encounter most strikingly Proclus' total absence of specific example or metaphor. He is the philosopher totally void of imagination and poetry. That only partly explains why he is so difficult and unrewarding to read—his endless complications of syntax, never quite hitting the nail on the head and yet hammering away madly, do the rest.

Proclus' puzzle-board gets more cloudy when he states evil cannot be measured. He is not talking about how the plague is so horrific that its suffering baffles measurement. What Proclus is saying is evil is an abstraction, like good and happy, and the common surveyor's measuring stick cannot be applied to them. This might be as close as Proclus gets to a precise definition. His long study of Socrates apparently did him very little good. He sometimes states evil comes from Nature and then corrects himself, claiming evil could not possibly be part of

Nature. The good birds in the trees do not undergo any change of behavior.

Since our harsh critique about Proclus is the manner he sets words down on paper, we feel justified in closing this chapter with a long quote from Proclus from near the close of his essay on evil. (Start of Section 5) Our reader may read as long as he likes.

It must now, therefore, be shown what evil itself is. It appears, however, to be the most difficult of all things to know what is essentially the nature itself of evil; since all knowledge is a contact with form, and is itself a form. But evil is without form, and is as it were privation. This, perhaps, will become manifest, if, looking to good itself and the nature of what is good, we thus survey what evil itself is. For as that which is the first good, is beyond all things, so evil itself is destitute of all good; I mean so far as it is evil, and a defect and private of good. With respect to good, therefore, how far it extends, after what manner it exists, and what order it possesses, we have elsewhere shown. But with respect to evil, if so far as evil it is entirely a privation of good, it follows that as evil it is destitute of the fountain of good; that as infinite it is deprived of the first bound; as debility, that is without the power which is in the intelligible order; that as incommensurable, and false, and turpitude itself, it is destitute of the beauty, truth and symmetry through which that which is mixed, and in which the unities of beings subsist;

that as being naturally without location and unstable, it is deprived of the nature and power of eternity which abides in one; but that as privation and without life it does not participate of the first monad of forms, and of the life which is there.

Chapter Eighteen:

Iamblichus, Master of Theurgy

Writers on Ficino make a habit of listing the Neo-Platonic philosophers whom the great Florentine pulled out of oblivion by his translations and commentary. Iamblichus of Syria (240-325 C.E.) always makes the list, placing him in very good company—Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Iamblichus, Pseudo-Dionysius—but in this list of worthies, Iamblichus is seldom heard from again. It would be more accurate to say he is never heard from again. Gregory Shaw, our foremost expert on Iamblichus, gives part of the answer in his excellent, truly essential volume: *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neo-Platonism of Iamblichus*, published in 1995 by the Pennsylvania University Press. Shaw writes on page five, “much of Iamblichus’ writing is fragmentary.” That is clearly the case today, and Shaw brilliantly pulls together all we can know of Iamblichus, using many apt and incisive quotes, so we can at last fit Iamblichus solidly within his own times and analyze his wide-ranging influence on philosophical contemporaries. It is not an exaggeration to say that Shaw resurrects Iamblichus for our own times in a manner similar to what Ficino did in the

Quattrocento. We would not be writing this chapter without both men.

The core of Iamblichus' teaching was theurgy, not an easy term to define by modern standards, especially since no concrete evidence exists as to how Iamblichus' theurgy was practiced. We can know theurgy was a religious rite, with prayers, supplications, and sacrifices meant to induce favor from the pagan gods. Pagan is not a pejorative term, but rather the beloved gods of ancient Greece and Rome—and thereby Plato's devoted readers—and the powerful gods faced ridicule and destruction by the burgeoning, ever-expanding Christianity. Iamblichus firmly believed each human possessed an immortal soul, and his theurgy or divine rite would lift that soul closer to the gods and prepare for a joyous afterlife. He could also address his sacred rites to a single deity for the same purposes. The comparisons with the Catholic mass are obvious, and this might explain the hair-pulling fury Catholics felt about Iamblichus—he was not only a heretic, but a heretic quite close to home.

Ficino rather bravely performed sacred rites, similar to what he thought Iamblichus might have done, in the secluded groves outside of Florence. Ficino was, among so many things, a Catholic priest, and so his head might not have stayed long on his shoulders if an inquisitor found him performing sacred rites. Shaw believes Ficino's astrological practices might have been his imitation of Iamblichus (pp. 173-175), but Ficino was a known astrologer and would not have required lessons from a fourth century Syrian magus. Shaw splits hairs by stating Ficino meant to “accommodate” himself to divine powers high in the night sky rather than beseech them; this of course is Ficino's subtle but combative argument when writing about astrology,

which places him a long way from Iamblichus and shows his constant wariness about inquisitors. Near the end of the Quattrocento, Florence would be the ghastly sight of Savonarola's burning.

Yet Shaw is correct that Ficino performed theurgy, but like Iamblichus, we have no evidence of how this was done. If prayers or hymns were performed, we have no texts. If sacrifices were made, we know nothing of what was the offering. Any dancing or costumes or breast-beating is also unknown. However, one huge fact is known: both Iamblichus and Ficino were devout Platonists, and no theurgy could be performed without deep involvement with Plato's teachings, especially when these teachings regarded the soul and its ever-changing place in the hierarchy of being.

Plotinus, Iamblichus' great predecessor in Neo-Platonism, believed only part of the soul entered the human body, while the remaining part stayed in heaven above, waiting anxiously for its lower half to return, an upward return, almost like a straight line, if the soul behaved properly on earth. Iamblichus could not have disagreed more. He believed the entire soul entered the human body, and so this body must do all it could so its soul could return safely to the heavenly cosmic realm. To enhance the soul's chances, theurgy is required. No other Neo-Platonist makes that claim. Hence Iamblichus was the single leader of a single movement, all taking place within the divine boundaries of Platonism.

To the modern mind, these debates on the soul between Plotinus and Iamblichus might seem as useful as counting angels on the head of a pin, but these two philosophers were deeply serious, for what was at stake was the nature of ultimate reality, divine and human, and how the solitary person could

negotiate his way within that reality. It could almost be seen as a forecast of Dante's poem, if only our two philosophers had higher gifts of poetry.

Yet Plotinus and Iamblichus often can produce beautiful language, always prose, for they write of beauty and the cause of beauty, the Platonic Idea of beauty, and they try to bring together as many words as they can to fit this subject. Beauty is light, light in all its many manifestations. Beauty is optics before science had ever got hold of that ever-elusive term.

An appropriate question is, can any of these theurgic rituals have influenced the drama of Shakespeare and Marlowe, and the obvious answer is we simply do not know enough. Other rituals, vastly different and coming from primitive folk customs, did significantly influence Shakespeare, and we know this from the exemplary scholarship of Linda Woodbridge, both in her volume *The Scythe of Saturn: Shakespeare and Magical Thinking*, University of Illinois Press, 1994, and the fine collection of essays she edited with Edward Berry on similar materials, *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and His Age*, University of Illinois Press, 1992. Not a word of Neo-Platonism is to be found in these two books. Literacy would not seem a requirement in the rituals Woodbridge writes about, while for the Neo-Platonists, literacy is all.

Even if Shakespeare never set eyes on Iamblichus, which is rather likely, the great Syrian magus reinforces a vital concept found throughout Shakespeare: hierarchy. Hierarchy is a primary way for Shakespeare to deal with magical and supernal entities. We shall find many striking examples throughout this study. As we know, Ficino lived for his hierarchies, and set them rollicking full-blast throughout the

Renaissance. This would largely explain why Ficino took so strongly to Iamblichus, who also built his system on rigid hierarchies. Again, what might seem meaningless to moderns was a pondering of the reality of nature—the reality of creation—to Ficino and Iamblichus. It was their quantum physics—the human reaching out to the divine—they could never see it, but they always knew it was there.

Iamblichus places a supreme being on top, followed by lesser gods, followed by daemons who connect the lesser gods to human souls, who tower above animals, insects, plants, stones. Remove the minor gods—which Iamblichus would never dare do—and turn the daemons into angels—not really much of a change—and our Syrian has a structure that could cohere very nicely with Catholicism. No wonder Catholics feared his theurgy; he was stepping on their toes, taking over their space, getting too close for comfort. We can make generalizations without witnessing his theurgy; he wanted the soul to move upward, and the next life counted far more than this one. This theology, both vague and solid, along with the hierarchy, would find ways of appearing in Shakespeare's plays many times over. Elizabethans called it the Great Chain of Being, but Iamblichus had been there a thousand years before. If they would not know his name, they would surely know Ficino and what the Florentine had gained from his gifted predecessor.

Two fourth century biographies can add insight into Iamblichus. Iamblichus himself wrote *A Life of Pythagoras*, and Martinus of Samaria wrote, *Life of Proclus or Concerning Happiness*. The biography of Pythagoras has more in common with a Christian Gospel than a saint's life, pagan or Christian. Divine intervention takes place at Pythagoras' birth, and his

wisdom as a youth entralls the wisest teachers. The twelve-year old Jesus teaching in the temple comes to mind, and Iamblichus might be striving to compete with Christ. A young girl falls seriously ill, and Pythagoras heals her by his soft command, though he is nowhere near the sick child. Jesus could also heal at a distance. Pythagoras has a golden thigh, a wonder not thoroughly explained. He dies of old age, calmly, surrounded by his admirers. Jesus did not have it so easy, for he had sinners to save by his death. Apparently once a man was exposed to Pythagoras, he would sin no more.

The reader, of both lives of Pythagoras and Proclus, grows weary of the endless list of virtues. Proclus is always happy, the theme of Martinus' biography, because Proclus never makes a mistake nor does anything wrong. It would be hard to imagine this Proclus having mild digestion problems. Even Jesus was not always happy. Proclus was. He combines all the wisdom in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Ethics*, and lives accordingly. Pythagoras does the same. Hence true happiness comes from combining Plato and Aristotle. It also helps to avoid barbarian invasions, inquisitors and invasions by locusts. But perhaps Proclus would have been happy anyway. We are only sorry that his happiness was never tested. We would have liked to see him get up one morning and see a cloudy day.

Chapter Nineteen:

The Angelic Hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius

In 1492, a date famous for reasons other than Ficino's bibliography, our Florentine ventured into translating a philosopher with whom he had long been familiar: Dionysius the Areopagite. Ficino might have considered his subject more a theologian, and his original readers would have solemnly nodded in agreement. Ficino translated *The Mystical Theology*, a short work, about five to six pages, not enough to be a pamphlet, yet widely read for the five centuries before Ficino and the two centuries after. Ficino also translated *The Divine Names*, a much longer work, comprising a long pamphlet, and this maintained the long-term following of the shorter work. Like with Plato and Plotinus, a Renaissance reader could not think of Dionysius without nodding in gratitude to our Florentine.

Who was this Dionysius? Ficino lived to see his name surrounded by confusion and turmoil. His several writings were greatly admired, but who exactly was he? Medieval readers believed, without a passing thought, what they saw on the title page; the author was the saintly Dionysius the Areopagite, the

first Gentile convert of the Apostle Paul. Hence the author was a very significant man, and whatever he wrote should be carefully perused with deep seriousness. He wrote in Greek, so he surely got the language right. Ficino, as a very young man, would have believed all this when he first read Dionysius. The identity would have seemed carved in stone.

All this would change in the mid Quattrocento when Lorenzo Valla, a gifted Greek scholar, began applying his historical-critical gifts to Dionysius. Valla cried fraud. The Dionysius on the title page could not under any circumstances be the original Areopagite who had known Paul. Why? He used Greek vocabulary that was not available to the Areopagite, and his several works were not mentioned in Paul's time—and nowhere to be found—before the early fourth century. Valla made his logical conclusion; the author should be renamed—the title Pseudo-Dionysius has been the pen-name that has stuck—and the several works could not have been written before the mid fourth century, most likely decades later.

Valla's conclusions have never been seriously challenged. Ficino knew Valla personally and did not challenge him. Yet the works of Pseudo-Dionysius remained immensely popular, in Ficino's day and ours. Three decades after Valla's fraud pronouncement, Ficino still maintained his intense interest in Dionysius—we will drop the Pseudo—to make those two 1492 translations. Ficino was by then an old man and the work might not have been easy for him. Our English translation is by Colm Luibheid, published in 1987 by the Paulist Fathers for their Classics of Western Spirituality Series on the Complete Dionysius. The Paulist Fathers should be applauded for this series, each and every volume. They are doing, in our century, similar work to what Ficino did in his.

The Mystical Theology and *The Divine Names* focus on a single theme: no human language can possibly convey the splendors and wonders of God. The divine monotheism is implied. Truth can be found in Scripture, but Scripture is words, powerfully inspired words, inevitably words written by humans for other humans, and therefore inadequate for more than temporary transcendence.

Dionysius writes beautifully. He is often more poet than theologian, and a very fine poet indeed. He makes magnificent use of language to show how language cannot convey the highest plane of divinity, which is eternally ineffable, who is God. Dionysius writes so well that a literary historian can understand how Valla's outcry had little or no impact on the multitude of the unknown author's readers. Is it possible Valla ever thought it would? Dionysius must be read to be experienced, as one enlightened spiritual phrase follows another—a critic's description is far from adequate.

Dionysius is a Platonist. He talks of Ideal Forms that exist only in God's vast, truly infinite, spiritual dominion, and mirror the comparatively unimpressive, drab, corporal, earthbound objects. Metals can develop, grow, mutate, change within Dionysius' earth, and so he makes a firm case for alchemy. Picking up on Valla, this would indicate our author lived far past the fifth century. Very little alchemy was taking place at the council of Nicaea. A vocabulary of emanations and overflowing is used to describe creation by the Deity, and this is precisely the language used by Plotinus in describing God in the act of perpetual creation. Clearly our author was not a companion of St. Paul.

Dionysius' Neo-Platonic strain merges with Hermeticism when he repeatedly uses the sun as God's primary

symbol. The sun is merged with Ideal Forms of Beauty and Good. Copernicus was impressed with this message—he mentions Thrice-Great Hermes in his great scientific tome in 1543—and the reader is reminded of the closing lines of Keats' Grecian Urn.

Monad is also a frequent Dionysian image for God which merges Neo-Platonism and Hermes, with a solemn nod to Pythagoras. Of course Dionysius finds Monad an inadequate image, even when he unites it with Being, another Ideal Form, the divine source of all being, for all numbers of all creation are contained within it. Dionysius waxes poetic in explicating other inadequate terms for Deity: Wisdom, Mind, Truth, Cause, Pre-existent. Ficino, in his constant effort to merge Christian truth with classicism, would have found all this profoundly satisfying. He was not alone among Renaissance thinkers living under the shadow of the Vatican.

Dionysius takes on the challenging subject of evil in *The Divine Names*. He makes no effort to deny the tragic prevalence of evil. His problem, both philosophical and personal, is how all this evil can persist on an earth under the all-encompassing power of an all-loving God. Dionysius is not the first to ponder this structure, nor shall he ever be the last, but he does approach originality by avoiding a cosmic dualism and a worthy opponent of god in the terrifying figure of Satan. He is not John Milton. He cannot rely on a supernatural Anti-Christ to explicate or define evil. He cannot blame God—Dionysius can never seriously consider any failing in his beloved Deity—and so what exactly does that leave?

Dionysius can only blame the human condition, and he carefully avoids all mention of God's responsibility for creating this condition. Evil can never exist in the Ideal Forms of Good

and Virtue for that would be the domain of God. But humans do not live in that domain, and hence only deal with weak earthbound imitations of those divine Forms. Somehow Plato might not have agreed with this, but Dionysius does not mention Plato. Humans can and do turn away from the only virtues available to them, or in worst instances, they can lack these virtues within themselves.

Sadly this is the best explanation for evil that Dionysius can come up with. This might explain a husband and wife bickering, or a person cheating on his taxes, or perhaps a little shoplifting, but Dionysius' aphorism—and he provides little more than that—allows no insight into horrific incidents of rape, murder, incest, arson, pillage. We do not mention the monumental tragedies of recent centuries that neither Dionysius nor Ficino could have known nothing about. Dionysius is a brilliantly incisive writer, often wise and profound, and yet we would not be telling his full story if we did not mention his one weakness.

By far Dionysius' most popular and influential work was *The Celestial Hierarchy*. Ficino did not translate this, but he was a strong advocate of its message, which again merged Christianity and classicism. Ficino's position added to the lasting success of this work in the Quattrocento and the centuries afterward. Moderns feel the influence, even if they have never heard the name Dionysius, which is highly probable.

Why the extraordinary success? Dionysius wrote the definitive work about angels. Whoever Dionysius might have been, or whenever his exact dates, no book about angels had ever been so complete, so knowing, so well thought-out. If you wanted to know whatever could be known about angels, you read Dionysius' *The Celestial Harmony*. It did not matter that

Dionysius' copious material did not come from Scripture, a church council, or a previous thinker. If he had been converted by St. Paul, that alone would make his book convincing. If he indeed lived four or five centuries after Paul, he wrote so convincingly about angels, with such breathtaking confidence and ease, with a clarity and precision of thought applied to the most delicate of spiritual matters, that his readers, by and large, in a great overwhelming abundance, believed him. From henceforth, whoever wrote about angels, would have to refer back to Dionysius. Whatever great renaissance painter desired to depict angels would let Dionysius be his original guide.

The Renaissance, including Ficino and Pico, Shakespeare and Marlowe, believed in hierarchy. The great Chain of Being is the term often used for the concept, with God at the highest peak, moving downward to angels, humans, animals, plants, stones. This last sentence is a correct, scholarly statement, especially as applied to the Elizabethans. But long before Shakespeare's age and the great chain, long before Ficino's intense interest in hierarchies, there was Dionysius, who divided the angels into a ranking of nine. Curiously the lowest or ninth rank of angels were the messengers, and these are the only angels of Scripture: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, the only angels known to us, the only angels who have recognizable names—apparently God could not let them take vital messages to man or woman without calling them something. Readers recognized these three names and gave Dionysius full credibility.

So much of *The Celestial Hierarch* reads like a divine phone directory of the nine divisions of angels, with individual names and sub-divisions. This is not enlightening reading, though John Milton would beg to differ. What matters is the

total trust Dionysius held in the perfect hierarchical order of the divine. Angels in rank one held powers lacking in angels in rank two, who held powers lacking in rank three, and so on down to our angels with familiar names. A reader needs to believe in angels to find this captivating, but Dionysius held an audience from Rome's fall to the Enlightenment.

Dionysius wrote *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. This time the hierarchy is firmly grounded on earth, something new for Dionysius, with all figures members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. As with the long lists of angels, this human hierarchy does not make enthralling reading for moderns. Even Renaissance readers preferred the angels over bishops by a huge margin. It is hard to know how unhappy this made the Vatican—after all, angels are angels. The period obsession with hierarchy endures. Dionysius redeems this work with beautifully detailed descriptions of Catholic sacraments. A reader could belong to any belief system, or none at all, to feel the intense spirituality of Dionysius at his best—and this is the best time to take our parting of him, with his intense spirituality at its highest peak.

Chapter Twenty:

Boethius, The Philosopher of Lasting Values

Boethius is the one significant Neo-Platonic thinker of the late Roman Empire whom Ficino did not translate and introduce to the Quattrocento. A study of Neo-Platonism in the Renaissance requires a close look at Boethius' masterpiece, the philosophical dialogue that truly has earned his immortality, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius' full name was Anicius Manlius Severinus, and his dates are approximate: 480 to 524 A.D. A certain date is 510, when he was appointed to serve as counsel under Theodoric the Great. He was a politician who wrote serious works of philosophy. He had grandiose plans for translating Plato and Aristotle.

Boethius' ride on fortune's wheel took a furious downward turn. Fourteen years after his appointment, he was accused of treason and executed. He wrote the *Consolation* while awaiting his death. The poignant picture of a philosopher, sitting cramped in a cell condemned to death while writing an immortal treatise that seeks to grasp and comprehend all the eternal questions—this picture could not be made up nor exaggerated. The *Consolation* is a classic exposition of the

basic problems that the classical world struggled with. It deserves to be remembered. It will always be worth reading. Yet a significant portion of the *Consolation*'s lasting popularity—it stands alone as a philosophical work studied and pondered throughout the middle ages—must be attributed to the compelling circumstances in which it was written. Chaucer translated the work, as did Queen Elizabeth I. If Boethius had been a free man lying on a beach while composing, his work might not have been so successful.

We now approach the text, which Boethius has made very attractive. The *Consolation* is an extended dialogue between Boethius and Lady Philosophy, who appears like a vision at the work's opening paragraph. Boethius has poetic gifts. He intersperses thirty-nine, short, lyric poems throughout his dialogue, and these poems reinforce and add meaning to the dialogue. His opening description of Lady Philosophy is also poetic, and we quote. Our translation is by V. E. Watts.

While I was quietly thinking these thoughts over to myself and giving vent to my sorrow with the help of my pen, I became aware of a woman standing over me. She was of awe-inspiring appearance, her eyes burning and beyond the usual power of men. She was so full of years that I could hardly think of her as of my own generation, and yet she possessed a vivid colour and undiminished vigour. It was difficult to be sure of her height, for sometimes she was of average human size, while at other times she seemed to touch the very sky with the top of her head, and when she lifted herself even higher, she pierced it and was lost to human sight. Her

clothes were made of imperishable material, and of the finest thread woven with the most delicate skill. (Later she told me that she had made them with her own hands.)

Boethius has presented a remarkable lady with truly supernal qualities. Not every condemned inmate in a cell has such a visitor. She can weave philosophical arguments with the fine delicacy of her needle. She will show wisdom. Her stunning appearance sets high expectations, and she does not disappoint. Boethius might not walk to the executioner's block with a smile on his bedraggled face, but he would maintain a lasting serenity.

Boethius is important to students of Ficino because of his frequent connections to Plato. In Book One, Section III, Lady Philosophy attempts to comfort Boethius by specific references to Plato. Boethius has made his request, "I asked her to come down from the heights of heaven to my lonely place of banishment." He is not far from the turgid depths of self-pity. Lady Philosophy does have her task cut out for her. "Why, my child," she replied, "should I desert you?" Boethius stays silent, and lets her talk; he makes no objection to being called a child. Lady Philosophy emphasizes she will share his burden—"you have been saddled with because of the hatred of my name." She speaks of Plato, metaphor, and history. Boethius, throughout the dialogue, proves an excellent listener. He might have little choice. We quote Lady Philosophy's wise encouragement.

This is hardly the first time wisdom has been threatened with danger by the forces of evil. In olden times, too, before the time of my servant Plato, I fought many a great battle against the reckless forces of folly. And then, in Plato's own

lifetime, his master Socrates was unjustly put to death—a victorious death won with me at his side. After that the mobs of Epicureans and Stoics and the others each did all they could to seize for themselves the inheritance of wisdom that he left.

So far, Lady Philosophy sounds somewhat encouraging. Boethius can, with difficulty, compare himself to Socrates, and perhaps attain strength and comfort from that. But Boethius is badly troubled. He might not yet be ready to think of himself as Socrates. He never shows signs of a large ego. But Lady Philosophy continues talking. Her role is not so easy. Ignorance does have its power. We quote, uninterrupted from her last words.

As part of their plunder they tried to carry me off, but I fought and struggled, and in the fight the robe was torn which I had woven with my own hands. They tore off little pieces from it and went away in the fond belief that they had obtained the whole of philosophy. The sight of traces of my clothing on them gained them the reputation among the ignorant of being my familiars, and as a result many of them became corrupted by the ignorance of the uninitiated mob.

Lady Philosophy is speaking a key passage in lifting Boethius' spirits. What she has to teach will not be easy. She lists great men, all philosophers, who suffered horribly for their wisdom from the combined forces of ignorance. But her side, the one true side, can bravely fight back, bravely so. Boethius

might feel alone, miserably so, but that notion can change. The Lady speaks, trying to rouse hope.

The sole cause of their tragic sufferings was their obvious and complete contempt of the pursuits of immortal men which my teaching had instilled in them. It is hardly surprising if we are driven by the blasts of storms when our chief aim on this sea of life is to displease wicked men. And though their numbers are great, we can afford to despise them because they have no one to lead them and are carried along only by ignorance which distracts them first one way then another. When their forces attack us in superior numbers, our general conducts a tactical withdrawal of his forces to a strong point, and they are left to encumber themselves with useless plunder. Safe from their furious activity on our ramparts above, we can smile at their efforts to collect all the most useless booty: our citadel cannot fall to the assaults of folly.

Boethius' companion is a tough lady. Boethius complains he is a sad victim of the downward turning wheel of Fortune, a main theme throughout his work. His medieval readers would have responded to his many complaints against Fortune. Lady Philosophy will not be so sympathetic. Over the course of the dialogue, she must convince him that philosophy is more powerful, more conducive to profound inner strength, than Fortune. This is a major theme of Boethius, who feels deeply plagued by Fortune

He is now waiting to die because of specific political actions he undertook. In doing so, he was a Platonist, first and

foremost a Platonist, and this especially applies to his views on government. Before taking direct action, he had read *The Republic* very carefully. Let Boethius talk, Book One, Section IV. He addresses the magnificent lady.

This, then, is how you reward your followers. And yet it was no one but you who commended Plato's opinion that commonwealths would be blessed if they should be ruled by philosophers or if their rulers should happen to have studied philosophy. You took your cue from him and said that the reason why it was necessary for philosophers to take part in government was to prevent the reins of government falling into the hands of wicked and unprincipled men to the ruin and destruction of the good. And it was upon this authority that I decided to transfer to public administration what I had learned from you in the course of our private leisure.

We quote at length because Boethius is ever so carefully explaining how he reached his current tragic predicament, and because this is such a rare instance of someone putting Plato's political theories into direct action. The condemned Boethius might have more in common with Socrates than he realizes. We continue our essential quote, uninterrupted.

You and God, who has sowed you in the minds of wise men, are my witnesses, that the only consideration to impel me to any office was a general desire for good. This was the reason why I had no alternative but grimly to resist evil and why in the struggle to defend justice I have always been indifferent to the hatred I inspired in

men who wielded greater power than mine—an indifference inspired by the knowledge that I had freely followed my conscience.

Boethius now starts naming names. He can hardly get in any worse trouble than he already is. He does not expect heads will fall at his specific revelations. The only head in serious jeopardy is his own. Why mention names? His dialogue surely has no guarantee of publication. He would be a prophet without peer to foresee the lasting monumental success of his efforts. Perhaps he named names because that was a vital part of his story, providing a little catharsis, and slowly making him feel significantly better. We continue our quote, uninterrupted.

I have countless times opposed the attacks of Cunigast on the fortunes of some defenceless person, or stopped Triguilla, the Prefect of the Palace, from some injustice he had begun or already carried through. And I have countless times interposed my authority to protect wretched men from danger when they were hounded by the endless false accusations of the barbarians in their continuous and unpunished lust for wealth. I have never been moved from justice to injustice by anything. I have ached with as much pain as the provinces themselves to see their fortunes ruined by private plundering and public taxation. When the terrible famine came and a ruinous and inexplicable measure of forced sale of food supplies was announced which seemed calculated to crush the province of Campania with poverty, I took up the cudgels against the Praetorian Prefect in the interest of the

common good, and although the king knew of my actions, I succeeded in the struggle to block the sale.

Boethius continues in this personal vein for another 200 words, always specifying criminal politicians and their dastardly actions. He is an idealist, but that would hold true for any convinced Platonist.

In Book Two, Part VII, the precarious nature of fame is discussed by Boethius and his Lady. Fame is not worth yearning for, working for, nor losing a wink of sleep over. The dialogue makes similar arguments as Macrobius worked out in his long commentary on Scipio's Dream (another chapter). Both Lady Philosophy and Macrobius use geography as an argument against desiring fame. The world is such a vast, large place—with kingdoms and empires perhaps unknown—that a person can only hold fame in a very tiny portion of it. If so, why bother? Why try? What could be more meaningless? This is rather an easy problem for Boethius, who never particularly desired fame. He still has that big hurdle of Fortune's cruel whim to get over. He also needs to learn the true sources of happiness, always a welcome topic for Lady Philosophy or Plato.

Both these wise figures hold the same beliefs about human memory. Before birth, while still in heaven or Olympia or some such supernal place, the human soul has a full and complete memory of all sacred knowledge. When the soul is born into a human body, a tremendous amount of divine forgetting takes place. The child matures and grows, with all that sacred knowledge seemingly vanished. This is basic Plato. As the child becomes an adult, he can develop a specialized memory process, which reaches back to his early past life in

heaven and ever so slowly starts to recover small but significant portions of the lost sacred knowledge. This recovery process has a deep, spiritual quality, and should be continued throughout the person's lifetime. The formula is simple: the more he remembers, the closer to heaven he becomes. Intense contemplation is required, which explains why Ficino would have found the process so satisfactory. This recovery method is another Platonic proof for the soul's existence, and surely Ficino would have grasped hard onto that.

In Book Three, Lady Philosophy gets down to basics; what each human requires is happiness. This is a start. At last. What proves difficult, often immensely so, is how to attain that happiness. Aristotle wrote a long book called *Nichomachean Ethics* seeking to work out that problem. Lady Philosophy is briefer, much briefer, and she is a Platonist. She frequently refers to Plato, her lynchpin. She is a mistress of beautiful language, but she is grounded in Plato. If Plotinus had not lived after her, we could also look to him for an influence. Let her talk, Book Three, Section II.

In all the care with which they toil at countless enterprises, mortal men travel by different paths, though all are striving to reach one and the same goal, namely, happiness, which is good which once obtained leaves nothing more to be desired.

It is the perfection of all good things and contains in itself all that is good; and if anything were missing from it, it couldn't be perfect, because something would remain outside it, which could still be wished for. It is clear, therefore, that happiness is a state made perfect by the presence of everything that is good, a state

which, as we said, all mortal men are striving to reach through different paths. For the desire for true good is planted by Nature in the minds of men, only error leads them astray towards false good.

The Lady's speech is pure Plato. Socrates, Plato's voice, will repeatedly insist that humans only sin or commit crimes through lack of knowledge or error. Hence if a person knows the right thing to do, he shall always do it. Surely Boethius, a scholar, already knows all this, but sitting alone in a cell, he does need reminded—and this brings us back to memory, another strong Platonic concept. If Boethius could not get Socrates to visit his cell, he might do just as well with Lady Philosophy. Besides she's more attractive, spectacularly so. Ficino could not strongly disagree.

Next Lady Philosophy has her path clearly cut before her. She shall select possibilities of happiness—fame, fortune, power, wealth—and hold them up to a strong discerning light. Of course all these possibilities fail, by means of common sense and intelligent reasoning. Lady Philosophy gives her answer—also the answer of Plato and Christianity—long before the *Consolation* is over. Or so it seems. The answer to happiness is God. True and lasting happiness can derive from no other source. Goodness is the Platonic Idea that contains perfect goodness, and thereby this goodness is God. Hence Lady Philosophy reasons by the predicate nominative. This results in circular reasoning, but this will not trouble the true believers. Plotinus adds significant substance to this argument when he writes about the Good, but of course Lady Philosophy has no way of knowing this.

In Book Four, Section Three, Lady Philosophy develops her ideas of God, goodness, and happiness. She will lift her argument to a mystical strain; the person will become united with God in a special way, not a divine, intense contemplation as Ficino would expect, but rather the person will become god, small g. Lady Philosophy is moving into pagan areas, but that would be the home of Plato. Let her talk.

Goodness is happiness, and therefore it is obvious that all good men obtain happiness in virtue of their being good. But we agree that those who attain happiness are divine. The reward of the good, then, a reward that can never be decreased, that no one's power can diminish, and no one's wickedness darken, is to become gods.

This is a hard statement to top. Lady Philosophy goes on to warn of the dire prospects of the wicked. Boethius will forever keep listening. He might be in an ancient version of death row—and the clock keeps ticking as long as he keeps writing—he is nevertheless a good man, good through and through, and therefore a god, small g. This should provide considerable comfort to him. After all, his *Consolation* has provided comfort for fifteen centuries of troubled readers.

Long before John Calvin, Lady Philosophy tackles the problem of God's predestination. If God knows all future events—and of course He does—then all those events are determined to happen. They must happen. If God foresaw Cain killing Abel, then Cain cannot change his mind and make friends with his brother. Cain is foredoomed to be a killer. Abel's prospects are not a whole lot better. In all this, God

seems horribly unfair. Oswald cannot change his mind about shooting Kennedy. If God foresees it, it will happen.

Neither Plato nor Ficino ever deals with this quandary, and Lady Philosophy would be wise not to. But she did foresee a conundrum that would trouble the Reformation, and that helps to explain why that era would read her so closely. Unfortunately the best the Lady can come up with are extended definitions of Fate and Providence. She weaves a tangled web which we are not about to untangle, even if we could. Her basic answer is Providence: if God totally loves each human soul, then predestination should not be all that big a problem. God's love conquers all. We are not sure how—that would be outrageously pretentious—but He does. Boethius does not press her. He might be all tired out from asking questions.

Lady Philosophy concludes the *Consolation* with her eloquence on Providence, more prayerful than intellect. We conclude our chapter by quoting a poem that concludes Section Eleven of Book Three. Boethius has provided us with thirty-nine lyric poems of varying lengths. We must rank him as a minor poet, but a very fine one.

Whoever deeply searches out the truth
And will not be deceived by paths untrue,
Shall turn unto himself his inward gaze,
Shall bring his wandering thoughts in circle home
And teach his heart that what it seeks abroad
It holds in its own treasure chests within.
What error's gloomy clouds have veiled before
Will then shine clearer than the sun himself.
Not all its light is banished from the mind
By body's matter which makes men forget.
The seed of truth lies hidden deep within,

And teaching fans the spark to take new life;
Why else unaided can man answer true,
Unless deep in the heart the touchwood burns?
And if the muse of Plato speaks the truth,
Man but recalls what once he know and lost.

Chapter Twenty-one:

Julianus, the Unsung Mystic

We have a model edition of the *Chaldaean Oracles* to study, and not surprisingly, we owe this to the excellent work of a very small press: Heptangle Books of Gillette, New Jersey. Scholars should get on the mailing lists of as many small presses as possible. We never know where the next gem may be lurking. Ficino is connected with the *Chaldaean Oracles* for two reasons. By his middle years, he developed a strong interest—curiosity might be the better word—about Zoroaster, founder of an ancient Persian religion, based on a vast cosmic dualism of good and evil. Ficino would need only to have known that to connect Zoroaster with the Book of Revelations. That is a safe assumption, as is Ficino's awareness that any possible facts about Zoroaster's life are most likely legendary.

Ficino did not jump to foolish conclusions—never. But he had read the *Chaldaean Oracles*, a 300-line deeply mystical poem attributed to Zoroaster. Pico della Mirandola, a young man with a vast library, owned the copy that Ficino had access to. Presumably both men read the *Oracles* very carefully. Ficino would have found the work similar to his own mystical thinking

in many ways. This would pique and sustain his interest. Later scholarship would prove conclusively the *Oracles* have no connection with Zoroaster. But did Ficino think differently, and if so, how strongly? Ficino left behind no documents to tell us. Yet his strong interest in the *Oracles* significantly increased their readership in his age and for several ages that followed.

Our Heptangle edition contains a Latin rendering of the *Chaldaean Oracles* by Francisco Patrizzi, but Patrizzi published in 1593 and so this could not be the text that Ficino and Pico studied. It does show Heptangle's worthy effort to provide as much pertinent material as possible. Heptangle could not find the source Patrizzi worked from. A fine, poetic translation in English by Thomas Stanley, published in London in 1701, is also included. This is the 305-line text we shall work from. Heptangle also provides three commentaries on the *Oracles* that Ficino would have read: one by Proclus, who lived from 410-485, then George Gemistus Pletho, who died in 1464, and one by Michael Constantine Psellus, who lived from 1018 to 1079. A two page reflection by Porphyry concludes the book.

Heptangle provides a useful Publisher's Foreword which identifies the true author of the *Oracles*. It is not Zoroaster. This is no great surprise. The author is otherwise unknown. But he is Julius the theurgist, who lived during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Heptangle's source for this essential information is the acclaimed classical scholar E. R. Dodd, who made this identification in his scholarly article, "New Light on the Chaldaean Oracles," *Harvard Theological Review*, LIV, 1961, p. 261. Dodd also believes in the strong possibility the *Oracles* were delivered through the agency or spellbinding power of a mediumistic trance; Dodd expressed this interpretation in his

article, “Theurgy and its Relation to Neoplatonism,” *Journal of Roman Studies*, XXVII, p. 56.

After making good use of Dodd’s expertise, Heptangle’s Publisher’s Foreword strikes out most capably on its own. Little of Julianus is known, with the exception of two mind-boggling legends: Julianus saved the Roman army in 173 A.D. by causing a thunderstorm against the opposing Quadi, and he saved the city of Rome from the plague by uttering a command, apparently to the gods. Julianus was a man to be taken seriously. He is the first man to be called a theurgist. He was also a magician. Ficino’s interest in him is not hard to understand. His *Oracles* were saved from obscurity by Porphyry, and elevated to high spiritual authority by Iamblichus and Proclus.

Iamblichus was the major theurgist of the Neo-Platonic school. Theurgy, often called god-making, requires some form of ritual based on spiritual values. That is an inclusive definition, which has the weakness of vagueness that such definitions result in. Perhaps it would be clearer to say theurgy is active prayer. Ficino was a serious student of Iamblichus. He would have understood how the *Chaldaean Oracles* might have a solemn, intense performance quality. He would have approved any aid to divine contemplation.

Heptangle includes a short Preface by W. W. Westcott, a lengthy Introduction by Percy Bullock, and another short Preface by our English translator Thomas Stanley, published in 1701, to accompany his translation. Westcott and Bullock were both part of an 1895 edition. Heptangle leaves no stone unturned. Bullock’s piece is worth noting; he makes an elaborate comparison including two pages of charts, between Julianus and Kabbalah. Both are spiritual systems that rely on a

Supreme Being with descending hierarchical levels below. Bullock could easily have added Pseudo-Dionysius or Plotinus to his simple, basic structure. What matters in Bullock's analyses—and Julianus' verse—is all these hierarchical levels interact. Otherwise the contemplative would be facing a sad, lifeless cosmos with no place for theurgy. Theurgy will always require a text conveying spiritual movement.

A major virtue of Julianus' 305-line poem is the movement between human and spiritual realms is almost ceaseless. The reader is always leaning forward, waiting for the next abrupt, sudden shift. We can do no better than quote the constant energy and movement contained in Julianus.

To the intellectual presters of the intellectual fire,
all things
By yielding are subservient to the persuasive counsel
of the Father.
And to understand, and always to remain in a restless
whirling.
Fountains and principles; to turn, and always to remain
in a restless whirling.
By reason of the terrible menace of the Father.

Julianus frequently writes of the Father, who could easily fulfill a Biblical role that would satisfy Ficino. A quote of the Father's power is required, lines 90-94.

The mind of the Father made a jarring Noise,
understanding by vigorous Counsel,
Omniform Ideas; and flying out of one Fountain
They spray forth; for, from the Father was the Counsel
and End,
By which they are connected to the Father, by alternate
Life from several vehicles.

The Father is not without constant creativity, constant creation. Julianus often connects images of fire with the Father. Ficino would have nodded approvingly. Ficino believed prayerful contemplation should be an active process and that required a Father who could never stand still.

Julianus's lines have a tendency to explode against each other, which is another way of saying single lines come together with no obvious transition. Julianus does not describe creation with smooth flowing lines—we quote lines 151-163.

The Maker who operating by himself framed the World.
And there was another bulk of fire,
By it-self operating all things that the Body of the World
might be perfected,
That the World might be manifest and not seem
membranous.
The whole World of Fire, and Water, and Earth,
And all-nourishing Aether,
The unexpressible and expressible Watch-words of
the World.
One Life by another from the distributed channels
Passing from above to the opposite Part,
Through the Center of the Earth; and another fifth
middle:
Fiery Channel, where it descends to the material
channels
Life-bringing fire,
Stirring himself up with the Goal of resounding light.

This would not be an easy passage to paraphrase, but that is not what Julianus is about. If a skilled medium reads those lines in a haunting, wavering voice—one possible way to perform theurgy—the listener's mind can have an explosion of

reverent images. If so, Julianus has succeeded. With the Heptangle edition, we can be assured Julianus has been succeeding for two millennia.

Julianus could only increase his popularity by a vivid passage on astrology, lines 169-183. The challenging, turbulent nature of the verse is again shown in this quote.

For the Father congregated and seven Firmaments
of the World;
Circumscribing Heaven in a round figure,
He fixed a great company of inerratic stars,
And he constituted a septenary of erratic Animals.
Placing Earth in the middle, and Water in the middle
of the Earth.
The Air above these.
He fixed a great company of inerratic stars,
To be carri'd not by laborious and troublesome
Tension,
But by a settlement which hath not Error.
He fixed a great company of inerratic stars,
Forcing fire to fire,
To be carried by a settlement which hath not Error.
He constituted them six; casting into the midst
The fire of the sun,
Suspending their Disorder in well-ordered zones.

Obviously this passage was not composed by a serious astronomer—Copernicus would have struggled to make sense out of it—but again, that is not what Julianus is about. He moves rapidly from one cosmic image to another; what he seeks is cosmic intensity, suitable for the highest levels of prayer, rather than astronomical accuracy. A competent astrologer would have to look elsewhere.

Julianus shows his poetic gifts in this extended image of a bird. With Julianus, a bird is never simply a bird. We quote, lines 271-277.

Let alone the swift course of the Moon: she runs
ever by the impulse of Necessity.

The Progression of the Stars was not brought forth
for thy sake.

The aetherial wide flight of birds is not voracious,
And the Dissections of Entrails and Victims all these
are toys,

The supports of gainful cheats; fly thou these
If thou intend to open the Sacred Paradise of Piety
Where Virtue, Wisdom, and Equity, are assembled.
For thy vessel the Beasted of the Earth shall inhabit
These the Earth bewails, even to their Children.

Julianus is not a great poet, but consistently interesting. His bird is a part of the cosmos; that is a paraphrase that combines explicit accuracy with a total lack of poetry. We move to another quote that shows Julianus building an image, lines 286-294.

Of fire abundant whizzing and winding about the Earth,
But also to see a Horse more glittering than Light.

Or a Boy on thy shoulders riding on a Horse,
Fiery or adorned with Gold, or divested,
Or shooting and standing on thy shoulders.

If thou speak often to me, thou shalt see that which
is spoken:

For then neither appears the Coelestial concave
Bulk, nor do the stars shine: the light of the Moon
is covered,

The Earth stands not still, but all things appear Thunder.

This passage should not be paraphrased. Ficino would be a wise enough man not to try to. This is verse that leads to contemplation, spiritual insights, gleanings to the highest realm that can never quite be grasped. Julianus concludes his poem with the power of names. This would add force to the Kabbalah comparison, though Julianus needs 300 lines to get there. We quote his final seven lines.

Never change barbarous Names;
For there are Names in every Nation given from God,
Which have an unspeakable power in Rites.
When thou seest a Sacred Fire without Form,
Shining, flashingly through the depths of the World,
Hear the Voice of Fire.

Before closing this chapter, we want to look briefly at the commentaries provided by Heptangle editors. George Gemistus Pletho, an acclaimed Greek Scholar in the early Quattrocento, made two comments about Julianus' uses of fire. We quote both poet and commentator.

Julianus (line 2488):

Every way to the unfashioned soul stretch out
the Reins of Fire

Pletho:

'Draw unto thyself every way the Reins of Fire,'
which appear to thee when thou art sacrificing,
with a sincere Soul; viz., a simple, and not of
various habits.

Julianus (line 304):

When thou seest a Sacred Fire, without Form,
Shining flashing through the depth of the world,
Hear the voice of Fire.

Pletho:

When thou beholdest the divine fire void of figure brightly gliding up and down the World and graciously smiling, listen to this voice as bringing a most perfect praescience.

Pletho also shows a special interest in the great distance of the Father from the petitioner. This also deserves quoting.

Julianus (line 23):

The Father hath snatched away himself;
Neither hath he shut up his own Fire in
his Intellectual Power.

Pletho:

The Father has made himself exempt from all others; not including himself either in his own Intellectual Power, or in the second God who is next him; or limiting his own Fire, his own Divinity; for it is absolutely ungenerate, and itself existing by itself; so that his Divinity is exempt from all others; neither is it communicable to any other, although it be loved of all. That he communicates not himself, is not out of envy, but only by reason of the impossibility of the thing.

This is a mystic commenting on a mystic, and yes, Ficino would have liked that. He would have pondered each phrase, for only in that way could he lessen the distance from his kneeling presence to the almighty above, always the intent of mystics, a solid definition of what Ficino so many times called contemplation.

Chapter Twenty-two:

The Egyptian Hieroglyphics of Horapollo

The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo was destined to be a very popular work throughout the Renaissance. No edition exists before 1400. Twentieth century scholars found several 1419 editions in Florence, and considered the possibility one copy belonged to Ficino. It is not beyond probability, though impossible to prove. Ficino surely saw the book, for we have his remarks about it and he was interested in all things Egyptian. Horapollo is, of course, a pen name, combining the two ancient gods Horus and Apollo. Only Horus was Egyptian.

The book is a collection of Egyptian hieroglyphics in two parts: pictures and explanatory words. Hieroglyphics is the picture writing used in the lost Egypt of the pharaohs, when magic was practiced at a very high level, and when Thoth the divine scribe was taking dictation from a supreme being called Pymander. Ficino had of course translated what were believed to be Thoth's writings in the *Corpus Hermetica* in 1464. The Renaissance rage for Egyptian magic begins with this translation, and endured for fifteen decades. Truly, the

Hermetica has never stopped being taken seriously by mystics, seers, alchemists, and poets with occult visions.

The strong Renaissance interest in ancient Egyptian magic attributed to the wide popularity of *The Hieroglyphics*. Because no one could successfully translate the hieroglyphics, many leaped to the wild-eyed conclusion this writing contained powerful magic. This strange belief would only be increased by Ficino's famous translation. Numerous people, ignorant and wise, spent considerable time staring at all those little pictures that somehow communicated precise meaning. The first book of *The Hieroglyphics* contains seventy illustrations, and the second holds 119. The unknown editors carefully divided the mysterious original text into individual pictures.

This was the first step in producing a highly popular book. Next the unknown editors or authors wrote a concise, analytic description of each illustration. The result was similar to medieval beastiaries, which presented the engraving of an animal, often nicely done, with an accompanying list of symbols of folklore associated with the animal.

In truth, these beastiaries have nothing in common with a correct, accurate translation of the hieroglyphics. The Renaissance never came close to such accuracy; many tried to translate, but none had a clue. They assumed the ancient Egyptians were obsessed with symbols, magical symbols, and so they relentlessly analysed on this basis alone; it never seemed to occur to them how very difficult and mind-boggling such a language would be for basic, simple, human communications. It almost seemed as if the Renaissance lost track of the idea that ancient Egyptians concentrated on anything but magic. The stage was certainly set for the great, lasting success of Ficino's translation.

Plotinus, a great philosopher but poor linguist, made a significant comment on the Egyptian hieroglyphics. What Plotinus believed, Ficino was likely to believe. What Ficino believed was accepted by many. Plotinus carefully studied the hieroglyphics and concluded what his Renaissance successors would conclude: the old Egyptians communicated by means of symbolic pictures. No doubt Plotinus influenced all these successors. We now quote him.

It seems to me that the Egyptian sages, either working by right reasoning or spontaneously, when they desired to represent things through wisdom, did not use letters descriptive of words and sentences, imitating the sounds and pronunciation of propositions, but drew pictures, and carved one picture for each thing in their temples, thus making manifest the description of that thing. Thus each picture was a kind of understanding and wisdom and substance and given all at once, and not discursive reasoning and deliberation.

If the pictures were in temples, the profound spirituality of ancient Egyptian was involved, or so the Renaissance would interpret this passage. Our quote is from the Princeton University Press edition of *The Hieroglyphics*, translated by George Boas. This short volume has been popular for Princeton, first published in 1950, then reissued in 1978 and again in 1993. What Boas is translating are the hopeless mistranslations of the original unnamed author, who might have set to work on the project in the fourth century of the common era. This would allow for Plotinus' brief commentary. An original text would be

most interesting, but as we stated, no copy exists before 1400-1410.

Ficino was alert to the hieroglyphics, and this merits an extended quote from him. His interest in symbols was lifelong.

The Egyptian priests, when they wished to signify divine things, did not use letters, but whole figures of plants, trees, and animals; for God doubtless has a knowledge of things which is not complex discursive thought about its subject, but is, as it were, the simple and steadfast form of it. Your thought of time, for instance, is manifold and mobile, maintaining that time is speedy and by a sort of revolution joins the beginning to the end. It teaches prudence, produces much, and destroys it again. The Egyptians comprehend this whole discourse in one stable image, painting a winged serpent, holding its tail in its mouth. Other things are represented in similar images, as Horus describes.

Ficino either believed Horus, the god, was the author or a scribe took a very daunting pen name. How to choose? If Ficino deeply believed in Thoth and Pymander, he could surely believe in the god Horus. Renaissance belief systems might be difficult for our contemporary minds, but Ficino was consistent. Throughout his long and productive career, he was consistent.

In his introduction to his translation to *The Hieroglyphics*, George Boas stressed how his translations, combined with the Egyptian pictures, are very similar to emblem books, which entered the Renaissance cultural mainstream with the remarkable success of the first emblem

book by the Italian, Alciati, in 1531. Ficino died in 1499, but his comments on the emblem phenomenon would have been most interesting. In a quiet way, he helped to pave the path, for emblems were always about connections—pictures and words—and as of course we know, magic is about making connections. Hence emblem books would always have an aura of magic about them, and this surely helped their lasting popularity.

Boas is correct that emblems resemble his translations. The Renaissance emblem can be defined simply. Alciati introduced the format, which was often imitated, never improved on. Two sides of a page are required. One side shows a picture with symbolic or allegorical content, but a content difficult or impossible to understand. The Renaissance liked a challenge. On the opposite page is a poem, also difficult to understand. However, the picture's meaning becomes instantly clear by reading the poem. If this sounds intriguing, it gets better. The poem's meaning becomes instantly clear by studying the picture. Emblems are connections. Alciati often added an aphorism in Latin, but this usually played no part in the vital connection. At all times, Alciati had his finger on the public pulse. He knew his contemporaries liked aphorisms. So they got aphorisms. They liked the mysteries that abounded in connections. So they got that too.

What remains is to provide a sample quote from Boas' translation. We choose a lengthy one to show the interpretive process at its best, a full explication of so many complications—the subject is the baboon, Book One, Number 14. A nice touch of poetry rises to the surface.

When they mean the moon, or the inhabited earth, or letters, or a priest, or anger, or a diver,

they draw a baboon. The moon, because this animal has a certain sympathy with the conjunction of this goddess. For when the moon, moving into conjunction with the sun, is darkened, then the male baboon does not look nor does he eat; but he is bowed down to the earth in grief, as if lamenting for the rape of the moon. And the female does not look either and suffers the same things as the male, and bleeds from her genitals. For this reason up to now baboons have been fed in the temples, in order that from them can be known the time of the conjunction of the sun and moon. And the inhabited earth, since they say that there were seventy-two ancient countries of the earth. And the fact that these happen to be fed in the temples and taken care of (is explained because) these are not like other beasts who die in one day. But a part of them dies on each day and is honoured with funeral rites in the temples, while the rest of the body remains in its natural condition. And when the seventy-second day is completed, then the whole animal dies. And letters, because here in Egypt a race of baboons exists who know their letters, in accordance with which, when a baboon was first cared for in a temple, the priest handed him a tablet and pen and ink. This was to attempt to find out whether he was of the race which knew its letters and whether he could write. Moreover, the animal is sacred to Hermes, the god of letters. And a priest, because by nature the baboon does not eat fish, nor even "fish-bread."

And it is born circumcised, which operation the priests are accustomed to perform. And anger, because this animal beyond all others is the most irascible and irritable. And a diver, because the other animals which swim appear dirty, but this one alone walks to the place which it has chosen, dives, and does not carry off any mud.

Chapter Twenty-three:

The Meaning of Words in Nicolas of Cusa

Nicholas of Cusa was born in 1401 and died in 1464, when Ficino was translating the Hermetic books for Cosimo D'Medici. Renaissance scholars called him Cusanus, and so shall we. He was German, and wrote his theological works in a firm, sturdy Latin. He was not the elegant stylist so much admired by humanists who put so much preference on syntax over content. No one has ever had difficulty pondering Cusanus' sentence structure. He is the rare philosopher who avoids the semi-colon, a method for holding together meandering sentences running up and down the page. He writes neatly formed, complete sentences, and his knowledge of paragraphing would make a grammarian happy.

The challenge in reading Cusanus is the delicate subtlety of his thought. He was, above all, a devout Christian, and he spent his entire adult life in one ecclesiastical role or another. When he took part in papal politics, he was fortunate to come out on the right side. Hence this philosopher of profound and mystifying depths, accessible to only the most astute reader,

was a public man. His pontiffs might have held high regard for Cusanus without realizing he was the most important theologian of his long era. The pontiffs might have been bitterly irritated to know their names would soon be forgotten—most popes are—while Cusanus would be studied and honored for centuries to come. He is the rare example of the public and private man working so well in both areas.

Cusanus would influence Giordano Bruno, perhaps the major single influence on Bruno, as well as Galileo, Kepler, and Spinoza. These are great names in the history of western thought, and our reader can look to other studies about them. Bruno is discussed in my 1995 Edwin Mellen volume, *Renaissance Magic and Hermeticism in the Shakespeare Sonnets*. Ficino is also discussed with regard to the sonnets.

Cusanus had a major impact on Ficino, and our chapter focuses on the important variations of this influence. We are guided by Ernst Cassirer's classic study, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, published in 1963 by Harper and Row. Cassirer wrote in German, and we use the excellent English translation by Mario Domandi. We are indebted to Cassirer's opening two chapters. His first chapter provides a brilliant overall survey of Cusanus, and explicates why he is so particularly important to his time. The second chapter shows the influence of Cusanus on Ficino, and how this influence branched out to major Italian artists, such as Alberti and Leonardi.

Cassirer makes the significant point that nowhere in Ficino's copious writings can the name Cusanus be found. What then? This would seem a dead end in connecting the German and Italian. But Cassirer does not give up so easily, and with good reason. Cassirer finds Cusanus' influence deeply

imbedded in how Ficino approached the great questions of his philosophy. It was Cusanus' method that influenced the Florentine how to go about engaging a difficult philosophical problem, working slowly but surely at that problem for several years, and then gradually inching towards just what might be taken as a solution. Humility is all. Prayer is the great accompaniment of the thinker.

Cassirer, in his second chapter, explains in magnificent language how Ficino is the first, great, stopping-off point for Cusanus in the Italian Renaissance. We will quote freely and extensively from Cassirer's second chapter, which is a paraphrase of Ficino's lifelong indebtedness to Cusanus. If we attempted to explicate Cassirer, we would only be paraphrasing a paraphrasing, and Cassirer writes too well for that. If we have motivated our reader to study carefully his entire book, we have met one goal of this chapter.

Cusanus' most famous work is a long essay entitled, *On Learned Ignorance*. Of course he was influenced by the words Plato gave to Socrates: I know nothing and I am wise because I know nothing. Socrates was not given to false modesty, for dialogue after dialogue finds him showing just how much he truly does know. What Socrates is getting at is the difficulty of true and abiding knowledge. Cusanus strongly agrees, but he casts his search for knowledge far beyond a cosmic realm. Socrates would never have gone farther than that; if knowledge is outside the universe or its prevailing domain, that knowledge is outside his providence, and he attains wisdom by not carrying out such a search. How would Socrates have sought for wisdom beyond the realm of the visible stars? He was a great thinker, but he would have lacked the logistical tools to make the attempt.

Cusanus read Socrates in the original Greek. He was one scholar who did not need to wait until Ficino translated Plato into Latin. Cusanus learned much from the ancient Greek philosophers, but he also read the mathematics of that ancient era. He was at home with Archimedes and Aristophanes. Two generations after his death, Cusanus would influence the young Copernicus. If we take Cusanus lightly, we do so at our own risk.

As a priest, Cusanus was steeped in the Aristotle of Scholasticism. He knew Aquinas, letter and verse. His lifetime of tremendous reading produced a handful of long essays, but so many men have written more and influenced less. He foresaw the upcoming battle between Aristotle and Plato, and knew he could not come down firmly on either side. He admired both but he would imitate neither. His theology admires both and finds a way to accept both, but membership requires a deep humility. Cusanus is humble where Socrates might only have talked about that virtue.

Learned Ignorance is not so difficult to define until we start to ponder it. We had best begin by saying what it is not. Cusanus was a serious admirer of Pseudo-Dionysius, who proclaimed we can never truly know the goodness of God because that goodness is no mightily transcendent. Pseudo-Dionysius' method allows him to replace goodness with other virtues, such as justice, mercy, love. When applying these virtues to God, we remain ignorant. We learn this ignorance by prayer and contemplation. We are all the better for knowing this ignorance and drawn closer to God. Pseudo-Dionysius is a mystic, and focusing on the divine virtues we cannot understand is essential to his mystical approach.

Cusanus does not disagree with any of this. Pseudo-Dionysius builds a cosmos on hierarchy—a main Renaissance concept—with God at the highest and perhaps a stone or grain of sand at the lowest. Pseudo-Dionysius also provides a hierarchy of nine choirs of angels, a graduated listing celebrated and memorized from the middle ages to Victorian times. Cusanus has no problem with the angels. His theology of Learned Ignorance is far too exalted for angels to get in his way, but he does passionately disagree with any hierarchy that includes God.

The ignorance that humans must learn is God stays removed from any such hierarchical considerations. Language becomes important. Cusanus is not saying God is too far above the created cosmos to be part of a hierarchy. This, in effect, is what Pseudo-Dionysius says, and here the two great thinkers part company. Cusanus proclaims the infinity of God, an infinity that belongs only to God, and thereby removes God from even the slightest possibility of hierarchy. God is unique, infallible, alone.

Cusanus uses two words to describe this: Maximum and Minimum. He means these two terms to be infinite. God is Maximum and Minimum, and therefore Maximum and Minimum are one and the same, and no other entity can be Maximum and Minimum, the infinite large and the infinite small, for no other entity can be infinite, and therefore Maximum and Minimum are both God, which explicates their single entity.

Cusanus did not expect this to be easy to follow. He truly has become a writer at his wit's end in trying to describe what he can never possibly have experienced. How can he describe what no reader has possibly experienced? Cusanus

attempts to explicate by using geometric forms. He fails nobly. God cannot be represented by a circle because we can easily imagine a circle. God cannot be represented by an infinite straight line because we can imagine a significant part of that line and we can imagine no part of infinity. We are learning ignorance, and that is what Cusanus' famous essay is all about.

Cusanus borrows paradox from the ancient philosopher Zeno. In an infinite straight line—and Cusanus keeps coming back to that—what is longer, a there-foot segment or a two-foot segment? Zeno would have liked this. Cusanus holds that in any measure of infinity, the two segments are equal. Hence all the wonders of God are equal, and yet humans can never have the slightest grasp of what those wonders are—learned ignorance. The more ignorance we learn, the more inclined we are to get down on our knees and pray.

Cusanus works out another paradox: God is in all things, and yet God is in nothing. But these conflicting statements become clearer. God, whom we can never understand, has both plurality and unity. Cusanus enters the realm of pantheism, quite a nose dive for a philosopher who claimed not to know anything. Of course if he truly knew nothing, he would never have set pen to paper. If Socrates truly knew nothing, he would never have opened his mouth. A quote from Chapter Five, Paragraph One of Book Two of *On Learned Ignorance* can be helpful.

In the First Book it was shown that God is in all things in such a way that all things are in God, and now it is evident that God is in all things, as if, by mediation of the universe. It follows, then, that all are in all and each is in each. The universe, as most perfect, has preceded all things

in the order of nature, as it were, so that it could be each thing in each thing. In each creature, the universe is the creature, and each receives all things in such a way that in each way all are contractedly this thing. Since each thing cannot be actually all things, for it is contracted, it contracts all things, so that they are it. If, therefore, all things are in all things, all things are seen to precede each thing. All things, therefore, are not many things, since plurality does not precede each thing. For this reason, in the order of nature all things have, without plurality, preceded each thing. Therefore, many things are not actually in each thing, but rather all things are without plurality, each thing.

And so Cusanus has explained all the workings of the cosmos to us. Surely such a passage was taken very seriously by Spinoza in his endless efforts to find the cosmic structure of all things. What Cusanus is saying is as far as created matter goes, well, you can have it anyway you like or even some ways you have not thought of yet, for you will not be getting it right anyway, no matter how closely you connect it to geometric forms, for you can never possibly know the mind of God, and that is what this long, rambling search in abstract prose has been about, seeking to draw yourself closer to God by means of His creation, which of course can never happen because all the created matter that ever existed can never lead you to the slightest inkling or thought of infinity, and so you are right back to that blessed Learned Ignorance you started out with in the first place, only now you have a much better idea of how you just happened to get there.

The substance of Cusanus' meaning can best be found in a very short work titled, *Dialogue in the Hidden God*. The dialogue is a debate between Christian and Pagan about the necessity of Learned Ignorance in worshipping God. Not surprisingly, Christian wins the debate, which closes with a set speech by Pagan, summarizing all he has learned. We quote Pagan's speech in full.

Your explanation pleases me. I clearly understand that neither God nor God's name is to be found in the realm of all creatures and that God flees from every concept rather than being asserted as something. For that which does not have the condition of a creature is not to be found in the realm of creatures. In the realm of composite things the non-composite is not found. And all names that are named are of composite things. That which is composite is not from itself but from that which precedes every composite. And even though both the realm of composite things and all the composite things are what they are only through the non-composite, yet because it is not composite, it is unknown in the realm of composite things. Therefore, may God, who is hidden from the eyes of all the wise of the world, be blessed forever.

The Pagan's speech closes a very short dialogue, and he learns to think like this very quickly. Non-composite must be a weak synonym for infinity. Yet Cusanus would consider that a contradiction in terms. So what has the Pagan learned? Learned Ignorance. Quite a dose of it. Surely enough to get by, though it

is hard to picture him going out to convert other pagans. To what, you might ask? That is exactly the right question.

We turn now for needed guidance to the classic work of Ernst Cassirer. The great scholar discusses his experience of examining a portrait by Rogier van der Weyden. No matter from what part of the room Cassirer views the portrait, he holds the strong impression the portrait's penetrating eyes are pointing straight at him. He moves about and still the eyes remain focused on him. The portrait, which truly exists, becomes a metaphor for the God of Cusanus. The idea of metaphor is useful, for Cusanus has denied us any other way to approach infinity. Of course we will never get there. Cassirer grasps that, but he also understands the manner of approach can be important. Why else read Cusanus? Why else try to write about him?

Cassirer makes a useful comparison of Plato with Cusanus, which Ficino was certain to have noticed. Any attentive reader would. In the Forms of Plato, there can be no possible connection between the Form of Good or Love and the human practice, nor the Form of Circle and Triangle and what the human geometer might construct. The Forms of Plato are ideal or perfect. No human ever acted out a perfect love, and no geometer ever drew a perfect circle. Noble and worthwhile efforts can be made, but a final perfect result cannot happen. The dividing line between ideal and human can never be crossed. This diving line is similar to Pseudo-Dionysius' concept that God's goodness cannot be ever understood because it so far transcends human goodness. Pseudo-Dionysius is called a Neo-Platonic, and much admired by Ficino, for serious reasons.

Cusanus produces a similar dividing line between the infinity of God, whether Maximum or Minimum, and all the rest of creation. Cusanus regrets having to use language to explain all this. That is why the Pagan has such difficulty in making himself clear. If infinity were possible to define, then it would not be infinity. Cusanus believes this force so transcendent that even a dividing line is out of place.

Yet he does come down on the side of the Platonists in their battle with the dogmatic scholasticism of Aristotle. Aristotle had a far more mundane dividing line: all matter below the moon is made of composites of earth, air, fire, water, and all matter above the moon is made only of aether, a mysterious spiritual substance which Aristotle could neither define nor elucidate, the ethereal fifth force, the quintessence. Cusanus was certain God could do better than that, and never took Aristotle seriously. Aristotle's dividing line lacks any chance for mysticism, and neither Cusanus nor the Platonists could ever be without that. The Quattrocento would belong largely to Plato, with the ever-nourishing wellsprings in Florence.

Cassirer begins his in-depth study with Ficino in 1477, over a decade after the Hermetic books were translated. Ficino was forty-four and suffered a severe, perhaps fatal illness. He propped himself up in his solitary sickbed and read the great pagan writers of antiquity, those writers he knew so well. He did not get better. He did not improve. This troubled him, deeply so. He set aside his antique books and offered heartfelt prayers to the Virgin Mary. His condition swiftly improved. He recovered. This sudden combination of Christian prayer and healing would leave a solid influence on the rest of his life. Twelve years later, he would title his major, multi-volume life's

work, *Platonic Theology*. Cassirer suggests if not for the healing, the great Florentine might have put philosophy in his title.

After his healing, Ficino was prepared to study the oft-neglected Book Three of *On Learned Ignorance*, when Cusanus discusses the only way the human can reach the infinity of God—through the Incarnation of Christ. Cusanus has already displayed his gift for moving terms around, first to mean one thing, then another, then all the same. He deeply believes in the Christian Trinity, and uses his language gifts to make each person of the Trinity co-equal. Of course language cannot do that. Only faith can, and Cusanus knows this only too well. He does not dwell needlessly on the Trinity.

But the Incarnation is of special interest to him, of all-encompassing interest. His beliefs in cosmos and infinity would not make sense otherwise. Infinity is splendid, great ... infinity is, well, infinity ... but man cannot exist alone, isolated, forever separated from it ... no consolation lies in that, no hope, no prayerful thanks. Now enter the Incarnation, God made man, infinity made man, the miracle we could never dare to hope for, the miracle we could never dare to understand. Connecting infinity with terms like unity and plurality now conveys an intense, all-abiding meaning. Man has not been left alone on a twirling, spinning island of cosmic nothingness. Rather he has been brought home to the infinity who originally made him, and who asks no more but man kneel humbly before the Incarnation in prayer and acceptance.

Cusanus now struggles again with language. The Incarnation takes place for each human being who has ever lived, whether before or after Jesus' ministry. If a hundred billion people have walked this planet, then the Incarnation has

taken place, privately, soulfully, individually, a hundred billion times. The hugeness of that number, or any number, should not be too startling, for we are dealing with infinity, always that, always right over the next turn in the road.

We now begin our extensive quoting of Cassirer. Actually we are not quoting several pages but several paragraphs, which can be found on pages 63-67 in the Dover Press edition of Cassirer's work. Cassirer talks about the beauty of the Florentine's theory of knowledge, but a beauty also exists in Cassirer's prose, in his fine, subtle delineations of the most complex, refined spiritual matters. When he speaks of redemption, he uses another term for Cusanus' Incarnation.

If the Platonic Academy had been nothing but a completely retrogressive movement, we could never explain the strong and immediate influence it exerted on all the great Florentines—an influence that even affected the skeptical and cold mind of Machiavelli for a while. It is true that religious and theological interests determined the whole attitude and development of philosophical thought in the Academy. But it is also true that the religious spent itself and entered a new phase. The intellectual labours of the first half of the Quattrocento, out of which grew a new, 'modern,' concept of religion, were not lost on the Florentine Academy. It is certainly difficult to distinguish and follow the individual threads connecting the Platonic Academy to those intellectual labours; but the general, the immediate connection is quite obvious.

Cassirer has laid the groundwork for connecting Cusanus and Ficino. He admits his task will not be easy when required to provide details. We continue his quote, in mid paragraph, without missing a sentence.

One important connection between the doctrines of Ficino and Cusanus is apparent in the way they both pose and solve the *problem of knowledge*. But even more clearly than in those basic logical matters, the connection becomes visible in questions concerning metaphysics and the philosophy of religion. The speculations of Cusanus had established a new relationship between God and the world—a relationship that gave these speculations their distinctive character. Despite all the opposing intellectual currents it encountered there, this relationship remained in force even in Ficino's thought. In fact, it even found itself supported there by a motif that was relatively far from the mind of Cusanus. In his justification of the world, Cusanus was concerned essentially with mathematical and cosmological problems. But the Florentine Academy always returns to the miracle of beauty, to the miracle of artistic form and of artistic creation. And upon this miracle it finds its theodicy.

Theodicy, Cassirer might have told us, is a vindication of divine justice in the face of evil's existence. Evil is not a major topic of either Cusanus or Ficino, and so it is curious Cassirer uses this word. We can also take issue with Cassirer's emphasis on Cusanus' emphasis with mathematical problems.

This statement strongly indicates Cusanus was a practicing mathematician, and this is a large exaggeration. When Cusanus attempts, rather weakly, to compare God with infinite straight lines or a small number of geometric shapes or curves, he is working with metaphysics, not math. His knowledge of actual geometry could fill half a page. He shows no signs of pouring over Euclid. He attempts to show how a variety of simple curves can evoke infinity. Of course he fails. He expects to fail. He almost wants to fail, for now he has attained another example of Learned Ignorance, which is what his exercise with geometric forms was about all along. Cassirer overlooks this. But it can truly be said he overlooks little.

Anyhow we have finished quoting Cassirer's first paragraph comparing Cusanus and Ficino. We move on without missing a sentence.

The beauty of the universe indicates its divine origin and provides the ultimate and highest proof of its spiritual value. Beauty always appears as something completely objective—as measure and form, as relationship and harmony within things themselves. But the mind seizes this objective quality as something that belongs to it, i.e., as something that sprang forth from the essence of the mind. Since even the common, uneducated intellect distinguishes the beautiful from the ugly, and since it flees from the formless and turns to the formed, it follows that the intellect, independent of all experience and doctrine, carries within it a definite norm of beauty.

Cassirer does not mention the Platonic Form of ideal beauty, but a Florentine at Ficino's Academy would have contemplated that Form after carefully reading Cassirer's words. Plato is the bedrock of the Academy, and his profound influence can never be far off.

Cassirer next quotes from Ficino, and we reproduce that quote because it fits so neatly with all we are talking about. Ficino's words are in the Latin version of *Platonic Theology*, xi, 5. Fol. 255.

'Every mind,' states Ficino, 'lauds the round figure when it first encounters it in things and knows not wherefore it lauds it. So, too, in architecture we laud the symmetry of the walls, the disposition of the stones, the forms of windows and doors; and, in the human body, the proportion of its members; or, in a melody, the harmony of tones. If every mind approves of these, and if it must do so even without knowing the reason for this approbation, it can only be because of a natural and necessary instinct ... The reasons for these judgments are, therefore, innate in the mind itself.'

This is an essential teaching of Ficino, and can explicate his fondness for poetry and Orphic singing, which he performed himself on a lyre. The mind of man is connected to infinity through beauty or the mind's innate capacity to respond to beauty. Cusanus either overlooked this connection or never felt it.

So how is Cassirer to bring those two major figures together? His quote from Ficino would not appear to make

matters easy. We move on with Cassirer's words immediately following the quote, still in the same long paragraph.

Thus, harmony becomes the seal God has impressed upon his work; through harmony he has ennobled the work and placed it in an inner and necessary relationship with the human mind. With its knowledge of beauty, and with the standard it finds within itself, the human mind places itself between God and the world and thus encompasses both for the first time in a true trinity.

Cassirer has nicely paraphrased his quotation from Ficino. He has made himself an honorary member of the Florentine Academy. He has used beauty to break the dividing line between God and man. But beauty is not the Incarnation—at least not anywhere in standard Christian thought—nor is beauty a part of Cusanus' thinking. Cassirer needs to proceed further, and we keep quoting without a break.

Here again, we have the microcosm idea in that characteristic form given to it by Cusanus. Cusanus considers man to be the bond that joins the world—not only because man unifies within himself all the elements of the cosmos, but because the religious destiny of the cosmos is, in a sense, decided within man. Because he is the representative of the universe and the essence of all its powers, man cannot be raised to the divine without simultaneously raising the rest of the universe by virtue of and within the process of man's own ascension. The redemption of man, therefore, does not signify his liberation from a

world worthy of being left behind because it is the inferior realm of the senses. Rather, redemption now applies to the whole of being.

We need remind ourselves that both Cusanus and Ficino were priests, Catholic priests. In their long era, there was no other kind. Again by redemption, Cassirer refers to Cusanus's use of the Incarnation in Book Three of *Learned Ignorance*. If our reader ever wonders how so original a thought always avoided problems with the inquisition, the answer most likely is the content of Book Three. A Catholic Church fastened tightly to Aristotle would have no problems with a priest proclaiming the greatest gifts for both the individual and cosmos derive from the redemption. Cusanus would hardly have liked Pelagius, nor can he be accused of being a follower. We still need to know more how Cusanus influenced our Platonist in Florence. Let Cassirer continue without breaking stride.

The Florentine Academy takes up this thought. Indeed, it becomes one of the most important and fruitful elements in Ficino's philosophy of religion. Ficino also considers the soul as the spiritual 'mid-point' of the world, the 'third realm' between the intelligible and the sensible world. It is above time, because it contains time within itself; but it is also below things which do not participate in time. It is mobile and immobile, simple and multiple. It contains the higher, but in such a manner that it does not abandon the lower; it is never completely exhausted in a single movement, but rather contains the possibility of turning and returning even in the midst of that movement. Thus the

soul embraces the universe not only statically but, more important, dynamically.

Beauty is our operative word, and no one has ever written more beautifully about the soul than Ficino except of course his master in all things, the divine Plato. Cusanus might not have approved that adjective divine, but Ficino certainly would have inserted it.

The next operative word in Ficino is hierarchy, always that. He could not approach the soul or cosmos without the immediate need to seek hierarchy. This is his philosophical cornerstone, which later will be used by the magus Cornelius Agrippa and the dramatist Shakespeare. Hierarchy explains why Ficino was so devoted a follower of Pseudo-Dionysius. Let Cassirer continue to talk about Ficino's soul.

The soul is not made up of single parts that form the macrocosm; rather, it is directed according to its intention of these parts, but without ever being completely fixed or exhausted by any one direction. And this direction comes not from without but from within the soul itself. No overpowering fate, no violence of nature draws the soul down to the sensible world; nor does it passively receive divine grace that raises it up to the super-sensible.

What Ficino is talking about is the soul's free will. This would place him in solid agreement with both Aquinas and Cusanus. The latter emphasizes how the individual must steadfastly endure effort upon effort to attain Learned Ignorance. No backsliding is allowed. All this potential glory for the soul allows no place for the primal stigma of original sin, and with it the inevitable tendency of man to sin. This is a main

teaching of Augustine's sad theology, and neither Ficino nor Cusanus will be part of it. Let Cassirer explain. We are still quoting consecutively.

On this point Ficino differs from Augustine, whom he otherwise nearly always considers, as does Petrarch, the highest religious authority. Again, this departure from Augustine brings Ficino closer to Cusanus. Faithful to the basic attitude that dominates his whole philosophical doctrine, Cusanus had opposed the Pauline-Augustinian dogma of predestination. To be sure, he seeks neither to deny nor to limit the effectiveness of grace. But he nevertheless stoutly maintains the belief that the actual religious impulse derives not from without but from within the soul. For the essence of the soul is the capacity for self-movement and self-determination.

Cassirer now finds it necessary to quote from Cusanus, but not from his most famous work *On Learned Ignorance*. Rather Cassirer chooses a passage from *The Vision of God*, which we quote because of its closeness to Neo-Platonic mysticism and thereby its influence on Ficino. Cassirer will be careful not to overlook this influence on Ficino.

In *The Vision of God*, the soul says to God, 'Whoever does not possess you, cannot see you. No one grasps you to whom you have not given yourself. But how can I possess you, how can my word reach you, who are the unattainable? How can I entreat you? Is there anything more absurd than that you should give yourself to me,

you who are all in all? And how could you give yourself to me, without at the same time giving me heaven, earth, and all that is within them?’ And the answer the soul receives from God dismisses these doubts. ‘Be you yours, and I shall be yours.’

Cassirer responds to this quote, “Man’s freedom allows him to want or not want himself—and only if he automatically chooses the former will God be given to him. The choice, the final decision, rests with man.”

The age of Augustine, if there ever was such an age, is over. Pico della Mirandola’s magnificent “Essay on Man” sets the tone for the new age, and Pico was a student at Ficino’s Academy. Pico’s long exposition on the boundless wonders of individual man could only happen if that man had free will. When Hamlet exclaims on what a wondrous work is man, so noble in intellect, he is echoing Pico, picking up mightily where Pico left off. Above all, it is the supreme glory of free will that unites Cusanus and Ficino. Let Cassirer continue without skipping a line.

Ficino’s *De Christina religione* also maintains this basic view. It also modifies the idea of redemption in such a way that now the universe, including the sense world, seems saved in the religious sense. Not only has man’s redemption given him a new being; it has given the universe a new form. This transformation, this reformation, is equivalent to a new spiritual creation. Man’s mistrust of the world disappears as soon as he becomes conscious of his own divinity, as soon as he conquers his mistrust of

his own nature. In his Incarnation, God declared, and brought it to pass, that there would no longer be anything formless nor anything completely contemptible in the world. He could not raise man without ennobling the world within man, as man comes to a deeper understanding of his own nature and of the pure spirituality of his origin, he places a correspondingly higher value upon the world. And conversely, if his faith in himself is shaken, the entire cosmos is thrust back into the void, into the sphere of mortality. This interpretation of the idea of redemption, Ficino states emphatically, precludes all hierarchical gradation or mediation (*absque medio*). Similarly, we must recognize that our salvation consists in being related to him without mediators.

What Cassirer is saying, pure and simple, is Ficino is a Christian, and in this one fervent aspect of his belief system, he needs no hierarchy. His prayers move straight from his soul to Christ. Never mind what part of his soul. Never mind the Platonic hierarchy that can divide his soul into parts. Cassirer is bringing us to a vital, often overlooked area in Ficino's thought—his need for salvation. Plato will not get him to heaven, but Christ will. In this most basic of certainties, Ficino links arms with Cusanus. The structures of their philosophies might differ, and yet both consider the Incarnation the greatest event in each individual history. No gradations—that last statement cannot be improved upon.

Cassirer summarizes by starting a new paragraph. We are still quoting without interruption.

With this in mind, we can completely understand the deep influence exerted by the Platonic Academy on the great artists of the Renaissance. According to Ficino, the whole point of religious and philosophical knowledge is nothing other than the eradication from the world of everything that seems deformed; and the recognition that even things that seem formless participate in form. But such knowledge cannot content itself with mere concept; it must be transformed into action. Here begins the contribution of the artist.

We are soon to close our long quotation from Cassirer, but he will leave us at a place we truly want to be. Ficino's high role of the artist encompasses the spiritual. After all that has gone before, it could not be any other way. When critics talk of the divine as exalted place of verse, they are looking back to Ficino. It starts here. Recall Plato's low and dangerous opinion of poets in *The Republic*. This time Ficino strikes away from his master. If a few thinkers in the Renaissance believed poetry held special magical powers, it starts here. Let Cassirer continue.

He (the artist) can fulfill the requirement that speculation can only state. Man can only be certain that the sense world has form and shape if he continually gives it form. Ultimately, the beauty of the sensible world does not derive from itself; rather, it is founded in the fact that it becomes, in a sense, the medium through which the free creative force of man acts and becomes conscious of itself. Seen in this light, however, art no longer lies outside the province of religion

but rather becomes a moment of the religious process itself.

Hence, Ficino would have us believe, Shakespeare and Marlowe are not only poets but priests. Marlowe's turbulent biography might offset, but not if we concentrate solely on the soaring imagination of his work. The Elizabethan theatre might at times have appeared a bawdy place, and yet during the golden moments of its greatest drama, Ficino would consider it a temple. The Elizabethan sonneteers were priests in miniature. Creative work is not only given a high place amid human endeavor, but the closest to God and thereby the highest. Our finest poets truly walk on sacred ground.

Cassirer picks up this theme without dropping a line, without dropping a beat.

If redemption is conceived of as a renovation of the form of man and of the world, i.e., a true reformation, then the focal point of intellectual life must lie in the place where the 'idea' is embodied, i.e., where the non-sensible form present in the mind of the artist breaks forth into the world of the visible and becomes realized in it. Thus, speculation will inevitably go astray if it looks only at that which is already formed, instead of concerning itself with the basic act of formation itself.

This concludes Cassirer's brilliant commentary on Ficino, as well as our chapter. Cassirer will move on to talk about Leonardo, another great Florentine influenced by Ficino. All of Cassirer is worth reading. All of Cusanus is worth a close, careful study.

Chapter Twenty-four:

The Wondrous Achievement of Pico della Mirandola

Of the many important results of Frances Yates' 1964 book on Giordano Bruno, high on the list was both the renewed interest in Pico della Mirandola, a youthful student at Ficino's Academy, and a solid introduction of Pico as a profound student of Cabalah, a major source of his magical-philosophical system. Pico had the typical Christian education of a young nobleman in Italy, but like with so much else in his all-too-short life, he took this much further. Born in 1465, he learned to read scripture in the original tongues. This included studying Old Testament Hebrew with wise, elderly Jewish scholars. Pico most likely was the only Christian in Italy to accomplish this, perhaps in Europe. He was undoubtedly the first Christian in Renaissance Europe to apply his Hebrew fluency to mastering Cabalah, a complex, many-sided magical system of Jewish mysticism. The approximate year is 1486. Pico was a trailblazer. He inspired numerous other Christians over the next hundred years to master Hebrew, Cabalah, and other Jewish studies. The magical side of Jewish thought was brought center-stage into Renaissance writing.

Cabalah places deep emphasis on precise specifics of the Hebrew tongue. Hebrew has twenty-two letters, all consonants. All nouns come from tiny diacritical marks. Hence each letter gets a number, in consecutive order, first to last. If Cabalah is this difficult to explain—in only one of many aspects—consider the imponderable difficulties of actually learning it. Consider what Pico accomplished. If each consonant has a number, then each Hebrew word adds up to a number. The Cabalist, among so much else, looks for magical number coincidences. A famous example: print out in Hebrew “Jacob’s Ladder” and “Mount Sinai.” Add up the consonant values in these two phrases and the numbers are identical. The Cabalist is just getting started. He meditates on these phrases. He prays. He searches for other phrases with the same number—the technical term is gematria. He meditates. He prays and prays, and here lies the imperishable value.

The overall result that crescendoed throughout the Renaissance: words have magical power. If Hebrew words, why not Italian words? Why not English? Words and numbers—what better definition of verse? Magic? What better definition of great verse? Unlocking the mystical doors of Cabalah is a signpost towards breaking down barriers to all verse made difficult by deep mystical propensities.

Pico died in 1494 in Florence, the same day a French army invaded his beloved city. He would not have liked to see that. But he passed at thirty-one, only that. His many Latin poems are lost. His ambition to reconcile the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle never happened. He completed an essay vigorously condemning astrology, though he did not doubt stellar influences. Few in his age did. His attack on astrology was a sustained effort to defend free will, a supreme value to the Christian Pico. Like his mentor Ficino, he wrote commentaries: extended commentaries on

Genesis and on the collected Italian love poems of his friend Benivieni.

Pico wasted little of the few years given him. Perhaps he sensed he had limited time to meet his extraordinary goals, for at the young age of twenty-four, he showed up at the Vatican with a work titled, *900 Conclusions*. The title explains: Pico had composed 900 statements, aphorisms, lyrical fragments on all areas of world religion and philosophy. He included what science was available. He emphasized Jewish studies. The Vatican was stunned at the sheer unabashed audacity of the young man. Pico's noble ancestry might have kept the Inquisition from locking him up right then—make 900 religious statements and you can be St. Paul reborn, yet a few will be heretical. The Inquisition immediately jumped on thirteen. They had only started reading and were still jumping with anger when the Vatican shut Pico down. He fled to France, head still on his shoulders. He would stay there, greatly admired but under gentle house arrest, till the next pope, a Borgia, took power. Then Pico, gratefully, could return to live out his days in Florence. He never visited the Borgia pope with a new batch of religious conclusions.

We have not heard the entire story of Pico's *900 Conclusions*. He composed a prose opening, which he later added to in the form of an apology. He had gifts for both language and keeping out of dungeons. The resulting prose is now titled, "An Oration on the Dignity of Man," and it is not only the most revered piece Pico ever wrote, but perhaps the most honored essay of the Italian Renaissance.

Why should this be? Curiously it might result from a slight—or serious—misreading, which has all too often occurred to those unaware of Frances Yates. Before Yates convincingly placed Pico in the center of Cabalah and therefore Renaissance magic, our

young hero was regarded primarily as a humanist, a forerunner of Erasmus rather than Bruno. Of course both Erasmus and Bruno could have felt deep influences from Pico; this is not an either/or proposition, and Yates would be the last to state that. Certainly Pico strenuously upholds the unique value of man and thereby merges with humanists. But humanists are Christian and Pico does not genuflect in that direction, not in this essay.

Let Pico speak for himself, with no better place than his essay's opening: "I have read in the records of the Arabians, reverend Fathers, that Abadala the Saracen, when questioned as to what on this stage of the world, as it were, could be seen most worthy of wonder, replied, 'There is nothing to be seen more wonderful than man.'" The "reverend Fathers" were Vatican officials, who would not be smiling, since Pico has quoted from a cousin of Mohammed. The good fathers might not have known that, likely not, but clearly the young buzzard with the *900 Conclusions* was not quoting a Christian text. It would get worse. Pico would see to that. He stresses how Thrice-Great Hermes, translated by his mentor, agrees with Mohammed's cousin: "In agreement with this opinion is the saying of Hermes Trismegistus, 'A great miracle, Asclepius, is man.'" Obviously woman is not mentioned. We should note, as the reverend Fathers might, that *Asclepius* is the Hermetic text with the famous (or infamous) god-making passage, not a favorite with the Vatican. Pico only had to write two sentences to convince a scholar of Yates' accuracy.

The essay is divided into thirty-eight paragraphs. Our translator is Elizabeth Livermore Forbes. Pico, still in the first paragraph, calls man the "intimate of the gods." These are not Christian gods. Keep in mind this is Pico's attempt at an apology. In one phrase, he brings together the Persians, David of Old Testament fame, and angels: "The interval between fixed eternity

and fleeting time, and (as the Persians say) the bond, nay, rather, the marriage song of the world, on David's testimony but little lower than the angels." Still in paragraph one, he emphasizes, "the universal chain of Being." Man's rank in this chain is, "to be envied not only by brutes but even by the stars and by minds beyond this world."

Pico is slowly but surely reaching his magnificent thesis statement. He begins paragraph two with, "But hear, Fathers." He knows his *900 Conclusions* have placed him in deep trouble, and only the most profound, insightful, need I say magical arguments can free him. He has no self doubts or he would not start so forcefully. It would be odd to think of Pico ever having self doubt. Faith in God, "the supreme Architect," means faith in himself. Pico describes the highest exaltation and lowest depths of the Architect's creation. Still in his second paragraph, he still moves towards his age-defining thesis. "He (God) had adorned with Intelligences, the heavenly spheres; he had quickened with eternal souls and the excrementary and filthy parts of the lower world. He had filled with a multitude of animals of every kind. Everything was done, as Moses and Timaeus bear witness." Again Pico can easily jump cultures. His style becomes his content.

But God deeply sensed a vital, living, missing part, and that part was man. God speaks to this first man Adam, as he speaks to all men, now in paragraph three: "The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in those hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe what is in the world."

Hence Adam or all men are between angels and oxen, between all levels of angels and all levels of brutish creatures—man can soar or fall. This is the imperishable wonder of man. He can create himself. He can at all times, at all places, with no doubts or hesitations, create himself. He is the supreme creation of the supreme creator. The Renaissance shall study man, rather than exerting full constant attention on the closed, medieval cosmos that surrounds man. The study of man is man, and Pico's brilliant prose has lit the torch and led the way. If the church fathers did not hear this, they were the gloomy beasts caught napping.

Let Pico continued, still in paragraph three: “We have made thee (Adam) neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.”

Pico will develop this thesis from paragraphs four to twelve. From now on, we shall use numbers to indicate paragraph. Pico has grasped the divine theme of universal human existence, and he becomes the virtuoso magus-philosopher in pulling apt images out of a supernal sky. Man “was symbolized by Proteus in the mysteries.” (4) Pico changes subtext but not content twice in his next sentence: “Hence those metamorphoses renowned among the Hebrews and the Pythagoreans.” (4) What this amazing style is telling us is all belief systems have value—learn today as much as you can from as many sources as you can, sleep well tonight, and start it again tomorrow.

Prince Hamlet of Shakespeare's famed play shows strong signs of familiarity with Pico's “Oration.” In Act Two, Scene Two, Hamlet speaks in prose: “What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how expressive and admirable, in action how like an angel, in

apprehension how like a god—the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!” Hamlet’s melancholy takes over, but he has expressed Pico’s theme of the Renaissance man, moving, ever moving, ever human, ever divine.

The relentless creativity of combining spiritual truths and images drives Pico forever onward. Our last quote ended paragraph four. Our philosopher is chomping at the bit as he starts paragraph five. He notes, “The occult theology of the Hebrews”—not a phrase to endear him to church fathers—“sometimes transforms the holy Enoch into an angel of divinity, and sometimes transforms others into other divinities.” In the Old Testament, a single phrase tells us, “Enoch walked with God.” That of course puts Enoch in very good company, but Pico is quoting from a Book of Enoch (40:8), which is not allowed in the Holy Scripture of his time, nor our time. Pico means to weave the greatest possible tapestry of spiritual places, people, names—a tapestry that will cover the sky, and if you peek beyond it, you see more tapestry.

No sooner has Enoch passed our way, when Pico uses two ancient philosophers to move us down the chain of being, at once followed by Mohammed—again not a trio to please the church fathers. “The Pythagoreans degrade impious men into brutes and, if one is to believe Empedocles, even into plants.” (5) Of course Pico believes Empedocles. Why else name him? The oddity would be to find a wise mystic figure from the past whom Pico did not believe. “Mohammed, in imitation, often had this saying on his tongue, ‘They who have deviated from divine law become beasts,’ and surely we spoke justly.” (5) Mohammed and Empedocles? In the Catholic Church? This strange combination could only come from Pico’s pen. He does not appear aware of the severe risks he takes. He does not appear to be showing off—his mind works this way, brilliantly fertile, endlessly engaging, the true Renaissance

man, never content to hold the same place on the chain of being, aka Neo-Platonic hierarchy, for more than a deep long breath.

What inspires him is a multiplicity of inspired sources, and he hopes to his death this will inspire others. His language cannot hold still. What forever inspires him is motion. He might not have thoroughly thought this through himself, but this dazzling, wondrously abruptly conflicting array of images is what happens when he writes. There is no other like him, at least not in this glorious essay. If man is to be by far the most admired of all creatures, man had better keep moving—Enoch to Pythagoras to Mohammed—like a spectacularly magic double-play combination, with no looking back, no doubt these images and names will firmly hold together. Pico is the poet laureate of names and thought systems. He never needs to be winding up because he is never winding down.

It should not be surprising Pico eventually reaches Dionysius the Areopagite. (9) Pico believed Dionysius was a friend of the Apostle Paul, and this gave his writings an assured sacredness. Today we know this Dionysius is an unnamed Greek philosopher who lived about three or four centuries after Christ. The vagueness in dating is unavoidable, for we know nothing about the man. But whenever he lived, his writings survive, and they neatly, ever so precisely, divide the angels into ten levels of categories. How to climb these categories? Pico, in his inimitable fashion, is not shy to bring in Jacob's Ladder. (70) Holiness is required to make this ascension, but Pico knows all about that. (11). He mentions Homer and Heraclitus (10), then Mercury and the Blessed Mother (14).

Pico never quite forgets he is defending himself against church fathers. He is still twenty-four years old. He recalls several contents of his *900 Conclusions*: Plato and Aristotle are not in

serious disagreement; a bad magic exists and a good magic, and a self-defining Christian will only practice the latter; Cabalah leads the practitioner to full Christian beliefs, and will take the soul higher on the Neo-Platonic hierarchy than any prayer or magic or mystic method. This latter statement needs to be looked at closely, for it also would not win Pico friends among the church fathers. Pico's Cabalah will take him to far greater cosmic or spiritual heights than Ficino ever dared reach. The young man had certainly overawed his older mentor, though the two men were friends and never in direct competition.

Pico emphasizes how he never took money for philosophy, but only practiced the great art for its own sake. This statement must certainly have helped his cause. He revered holy theology—from Pico, that could mean just about anything, but perhaps the church saw fit not to dispute. We are not sure exactly how or why Pico escaped Rome. We only know he did.

Let us leave the last lines to Pico. He notes Zoroaster—not a church favorite—had four symbolic rivers: the right, expiation, light, piety. (19) Pico then takes all of paragraph 20 to expound:

Turn your attention, Fathers, to the diligent consideration of what these doctrines of Zoroaster mean. Surely nothing else than that we should wash away the uncleanness from our eyes by moral science as if by the western waves; that we should align their keen vision toward the right by the rule of dialectic as if by the northern line; that we should then accustom them to endure in the contemplation of nature the still feeble light of truth as if it were the first rays of the rising sun, so that at least, through the agency of theological piety and the most holy worship of God, we may like heavenly

eagles boldly endure the most brilliant splendor of the meridian sun. These are, perhaps, those ideas proper to morning, midday, and evening first sung by David and given a broader interpretation by Augustine. This is that noonday light which incites the Seraphs to their goal and equally sheds light on the Cherubs. This is that country toward which Abraham, our father of old, was ever journeying. This is that place where, as the doctrines of Cabalists and Moors have handed down to posterity, there is no room for unclean spirits. And, if it is to bring into the open anything at all of the occult mysteries, even in the guise of a riddle, since sudden fall from heaven has condemned the head of man to dizziness, and, in the words of Jeremiah, death has come in through our windows and smitten our vitals and our heart, let us summon Raphael, celestial physician, that he may set us free by moral philosophy and by dialectic as though by wholesome drugs. Then, when we are restored to health, Gabriel, "the strength of God," shall abide in us, leading us through the miracles of nature and showing us on every side the merit and the might of God. He will at last consign us to the high priest Michael, who will distinguish who have completed their term in the service of philosophy with the holy office of theology as if with a crown of precious stones.

Chapter Twenty-five:

The Many Sides of Cornelius Agrippa

This book's thesis throughout is Marsilio Ficino was the most influential writer on magic throughout the Renaissance and for three centuries afterward. Goethe, Coleridge, and Yeats were devoted readers. The second most influential writer on magic in the Renaissance was Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim. He was German but wrote in Latin. His masterpiece was the three-volume *The Occult Philosophy*, published from 1551 to 1533. For the next hundred years, this mammoth work would be read throughout Europe. In the mid seventeenth century, when magic slowly but surely turned to science, best exemplified by Robert Boyle turning from alchemy to chemistry, Agrippa lost his audience. He died in 1535, in sad, adverse circumstances. He was a year shy of turning fifty.

Agrippa's death requires more comment. He was impoverished. He did not live to see the great success his book would become. Conservative churchmen shook their heads and whispered behind closed doors that Agrippa got just what was coming to him. The German had written hundreds of pages explicating the black arts in vivid detail. He could not have picked

a more controversial subject. He ventured into magical areas where Ficino, intending to keep his head on his shoulders, feared to go. Agrippa's vast knowledge—he had truly read every book he ever got his hands on—made him a source of Marlowe's Faustus, who also offended churchmen by knowing vastly more than was good for him.

Marlowe wrote for a London playhouse audience that would have known Agrippa. The literate spectators would likely have read Agrippa. Frances Yates has traced Agrippa's influence on John Dee, the great English magus, who strongly influenced what his countrymen read on cosmology, ancient history, the occult. Agrippa would have fit in nicely for those readers. Sir Philip Sidney nodded respectfully to Agrippa in his "Defense of Poetry." He defined the dark magus as "merry." Surely no one else ever applied that term to Agrippa. But our German did write a lot of pages, more than one book, and he might somewhere have made an amusing comment.

The illiterate spectators at Marlowe's *Faustus* would have known the legends about Agrippa's endless vanity for the power of knowledge and the bizarre supernal events of his final days, centering around a dark, black, angrily snapping, loudly barking dog. At the close of his evil days, Agrippa was ostracized from not only respectable society but all society. Hence his only companion was the loud, obnoxious dog. Variations on the legend now come into play, but all provide the dog with satanic powers. The dog either is Satan—hence the *Faust* legend—or closely connected to Satan. Either way Agrippa has nothing but eternal damnation to look forward to, preceded by a dramatic leap by the dog, truly a scene-stealer, into a raging river. Agrippa stands dumbfounded on the shifting shore. He has lost his only friend. He might escape the

river, but he cannot escape the death Satan will soon be leading him to.

Agrippa's legends pale in importance to his writings. Three titles must be studied: the first draft of *The Occult Philosophy*, published in 1510, when Agrippa was twenty four; *The Vanity of Sciences*, called the *Vanitate*, published in 1530; and, the epic final draft of *The Occult Philosophy*, published between 1531 and 1533. Agrippa has deeply puzzled and confused scholars because *Vanitate* fiercely contradicts both the content and attitude of *The Occult Philosophy*, both editions.

Consider the dilemma. *Vanitate* outdoes Ecclesiastes in lamenting the vanity of human wishes and learning; a lengthy catalogue of all areas of knowledge is presented, and each subject is struck down with vigorous wit and force. No matter what topic a human wishes to study, his intellect will not be a match for it. All is vanity. Astrology is one of Agrippa's best examples in *Vanitate*. He acknowledges the immense popularity of astrology—in no little part to Agrippa's other writing—but insists this only adds to the high level of foolishness. His proof? Astrologers can never agree. Give three astrologers the same natal chart, and you get three different answers. This sounds rather like economists in today's world.

Agrippa provides the same total devaluation to geometry, agriculture, numismatics, ancient history, analyses of Homeric epics—whatever the topic, the human intellect will ultimately fail to handle it, the failure will bring the poor helpless ego crashing to the ground, and the lesson of Ecclesiastes will be learned once again, only to be sadly relearned the next time the ever optimistic human fool tries to learn something.

Agrippa's style or format was the catalogue. He published this all-comprehensive list of learning's impossibilities in 1530,

only a year before his all-comprehensive, encyclopedic study of magic's possibilities, *The Occult Philosophy*. In 1531, astrology is not only possible, but quite workable, with the author providing a detailed, hands-on approach. Scholars might believe these two books had two authors if there was not so much evidence to the contrary. Connecting links between the two books are difficult if not impossible to find.

One solid fact remains. *Vanitate* did not make Agrippa famous. A wide audience will never exist about the utter hopelessness of learning subject after subject. *Vanitate* does provide some useful social commentary. The filthy rich who do nothing to earn money nor help others are not to be applauded, unlike the laborer who earns his bread by the honest sweat of his brow. That last sentence is not interesting even to read. Several pages developing its didactic content would be little more than amusing, though we can be pleased Agrippa offended the overly comfortable in high places. Perhaps this is what Philip Sidney meant by "merry."

Frances Yates offers an interesting explanation to the two differing books. She believes Agrippa was aware of the storm of controversy his three-volume encyclopedic treatment of the occult would arouse. Hence he wanted a handy excuse on hand in *Vanitate* that he truly meant none of it. Agrippa never had to stand before the inquisition, but this excuse might not have washed. He would not be denying a pamphlet but a colossal, three-volume work. With all respect to the great Dame Frances, overlooking the elephant in the living room almost never works.

What then? One suggestion is Agrippa worked for patrons whose names have long been lost to us. One patron liked Ecclesiastes, and the other was fascinated with all aspects of magic. Agrippa wrote to please. He had already done the research.

He had spent his entire life reading and talking to educated people. The problem with this theory is the patrons could not have paid well, or at all. Otherwise Agrippa and his legendary dog would not have died in poverty. The poverty was all too real.

In July 1533, when all three volumes of *The Occult Philosophy* were published as a single entity, sections from *Vanitate* were attached to the end. This puzzle will not be solved. Agrippa did write *Vanitate* in France in 1526, when he was having political problems in that Gallic land. *Vanitate* was intended to help his situation. Perhaps the purpose worked, for Agrippa did leave France a free man. In all his controversial life, he was never arrested nor stood trial. Yet his French problems do not explain the future bibliographic history of *Vanitate*.

Perhaps our answer lies in Agrippa's desire for completion. He liked working with a plentiful supply of paper. He wrote his age's most complete account of the vanity and uselessness of magic, as well as the age's enduring, highly praised, encyclopedic treatment of magic, the ultimate do-it-yourself manual. If you were living in 1533, you could put those two works together, read them carefully, and you would not have to read a third book. Agrippa had said it all, and that might be what he was after. That might explain the mystery Dame Frances could not quite work out. Agrippa considered himself a teacher, and he meant to teach his world everything, and that required two hefty books. That indeed required contradicting himself.

We can now focus entirely on *The Occult Philosophy*. Our finest Agrippa scholar is Paola Zambelli, connected with London University and the Warburg Institute. In 1976, she published the long, in-depth, seminal article, "Magic and Radical Reformation in Agrippa." She connects Agrippa with the many different strands of the Protestant Reformation. Serious students of religious history

will want to read this article, published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 39 1976, pp. 69-103. Zambelli makes one essential point we need to put in place: the 1510 edition of *The Occult Philosophy* is a very different work than Agrippa's book of the same title published two decades later. The opening sentences of her fine article develop this theme. Zambelli tells us a dedication copy of the 1510 edition exists and "This manuscript is in itself a finished work of such historical importance that the librarian of the Warburg Institute, Hans Meier, very appropriately undertook an edition quite separately from any comparison with the definitive version published in 1533." Zambelli does not make a detailed point-by-point comparative study of the two works. Her excellent article has many other useful purposes.

But this comparison does need to be developed. Agrippa dedicated the 1510 edition to Johann Trithemius, a well-known occult scholar and cryptographer. Trithemius enjoyed creating and breaking codes—even today governments would find him useful—but also formed magical combinations of letters and numbers to conjure supernal powers. Trithemius would like to think he was only reaching out to angels, those paragons of goodness, but his methods offer no protection he might not find himself surrounded by demons of darkness. Agrippa no doubt found all this highly absorbing. This was just the kind of how-to material that found its way into his 1510 edition. His friendship with the older Trithemius, a mentor, would be lasting.

Another similar influence was Reuchlin's *Wonder Working Word*, also called *De Verbo Mirifico*, published in 1494, twenty-three years before Reuchlin's masterpiece, *The Art of the Cabala*, which would powerfully influence Agrippa's 1531 edition. But we do not want to get ahead of ourselves. An excellent in-depth article on Reuchlin's early work can be found in the same issue of the

Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute 39, 1976, pp. 104-138. The author is Charles Zika, the title, "Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirifico* and the Magic Debate of the Late Fifteenth Century." The Zika article is not to be overlooked by scholars in this subject area.

In 1992, E. J. Brill published a Latin edition of the 1533 Agricella edition. This is useful. The editor, V. Perrone Compagni, writes a fifty-page introduction to Agricella's career in English, also useful. Compagni emphasizes how the major influence on the 1510 edition was Ficino. This at last explains why this particular chapter has placed so much emphasis on Agricella, besides of course his long popularity and influence. The 1510 edition desires to restore and revive magic. It would not seem that Renaissance magic was having all that much trouble, and so if the newly burgeoning magic tradition was moving well, Agricella desired to pick up swiftly the pace. Also the size. Ficino's *De Vita* was a primary source. Agricella could not help but be impressed by the greatest of all self-help books on astrology.

Compagni is more specific, and relates Ficino's three primary theories that influenced the 1510 edition; 1.), a harmonious unity exists among all created beings and entities; 2.), the cosmos is animated; 3.), and, the stars play a mediatory role between the heavens above and humans below, as discussed with hundreds of specifics in *De Vita*. What these three factors told Agricella is that entities throughout the cosmos have sympathies and antipathies, and this dual fact is the cornerstone of all practical magic. Agricella was not an eccentric magus. In a world where multitudes deeply believed in magic—Ficino had long been a favorite writer—Agricella stood on solid ground. His 1510 edition was never published, not in Agricella's lifetime, probably not until Paolo Zambelli's librarian colleague began work in 1976. The wheels of scholarship can sometimes grind very slowly.

What makes Agrippa such a compelling figure is how he kept steadfastly reading and learning in the twenty years that separate his two editions. Otherwise his magnificent completeness would not be possible. In 1511, he traveled to Italy for seven years, and significantly deepened his knowledge of Ficino at the fountainhead of Renaissance Platonism. He discovered Pico and mastered another new writer. That would be his habit for the rest of his life. He was a relentless traveler. He did not spend those entire seven years in Italy. That sunny peninsula was only his home base. When he had read all the books in one area, he moved to another. His gift was to bring it all together. A greater gift might be to think he could bring it all together.

Compagni has carefully put together so much of what Agrippa read and learned during those two pivotal decades. The list is long and impressive. A study of Agrippa requires lists. This also holds true of Ficino, another great reader. For the scholar who has done little reading in magic and philosophy in the Renaissance, all of this can swiftly become tedious. Ficino translates and writes extensive commentary. Agrippa is a collector who has dozens of magical-cosmic-astrological slots to fill, and searches wherever he can to find the right-sized pieces for his larger-than-life, magnificent puzzle. Ficino is a major philosopher. This cannot be said for Agrippa, who could not have put together his huge construction, first or second draft, without Ficino.

Compagni shows how Ficino dominated Agrippa's first edition, and he will also show how Ficino dominates the second. D. P. Walker, in his classic book, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic From Ficino to Camparella*, 1958, emphatically makes this latter point. Walker's book was the beginning of our long, slow study of Renaissance magic, and he stresses how no Renaissance writer absorbed Ficino so thoroughly as Agrippa. Walker is talking about

the 1533 edition. He admits Ficino's ideas are widely "dispersed" throughout Agrippa's long work and not so easy to find or pinpoint, and yet a relentless reading of Agrippa will bring this out.

Not every scholar will wish to do this, so as is often the case, we take the word of other scholars. Scholars who have carefully scrutinized the 1533 B. J. Brill Latin edition stand in front. This places Compagni the editor first in line. He notes how Agrippa began his second edition with special study of Ficino's commentaries on Plato, particularly *The Symposium*. This volume has devoted an entire chapter to that commentary. Agrippa also delved into Ficino's commentaries on Plotinus. As we know, Ficino used one Plotinus commentary as Book Three of his *De Triplici Vita*, which we know as *De Vita Coelitus Comparanda*.

We assume D. P. Walker is talking about *De Vita* when he tells us specific Ficino ideas are unevenly spread throughout the 1533 edition. Hundreds of astrological specifics can be abstracted from *De Vita*. All this astrological instruction was taken as fact by Agrippa, and he wrote much of it down and repeated it as solid fact. The absolute truth of Ficino's astrology was not to be questioned.

Compagni's list includes three works by Pico: Conclusiones, Heptaplus, and Hermetis. Of course there was the ever increasing influence of Trithemius, which coincided with Reuchlin's, *The Art of the Cabala*. Agrippa was strongly influenced by Francisco Giorgio, a Venetian Franciscan, who created a cosmos of magical numbers called, *The Harmony of the World*. Giorgio is not a profound musician nor mathematician. He does not seek comparisons of intervals between planets and intervals of the harmonic scale. He is neither Pythagoras nor Kepler, nothing close.

What Giorgio sought and found was a simple coincidence in numbers: Jesus had twelve apostles and the zodiac has twelve signs. With this coincidence, Giorgio dug deeply for meaning, entering a strange form of creative writing that never considered simple coincidence. Yet he proposed a grand scheme spread out across the cosmos, a true Renaissance way of thinking, and Agrippa found that useful. He liked Giorgio's overall blueprint, if not the endless collection of coincidental specifics.

Compagni, whose introduction is one of the most useful pieces ever written about Agrippa, also finds our author reading the early church fathers. This is admirable, since Agrippa might be the only well-known magus to seek serious knowledge in that area. The same can be said about Agrippa's close study of Augustine. He also was a humanist. He lived with John Colet in England, and might have met Erasmus there. Agrippa and Erasmus were in Colet's vicinity at the same time, but no proof exists the two men ever talked to each other. But Agrippa was an avid reader of both Colet and Erasmus, and the latter made several complimentary remarks about Agrippa. Our author's interest in numerous Reformation writers can be found in the essential Zambelli article. The overused term Renaissance man does apply to Agrippa. This praise would surprise his numerous detractors, who hear the term black magic and yell foul. Agrippa dealt with the darker forms of magic—perhaps *Vanitate* was a calculated effort to relieve a guilty conscience—but he structured the three volumes of *The Occult Philosophy* on the white magic of Ficino.

Frances Yates discusses this connection in her acclaimed Bruno book. As we have heard so many times, Ficino saw the cosmos as a hierarchy, a primary gift to Elizabethan poetry. Agrippa uses each volume of his masterwork to study one level of Ficino's hierarchy, lowest to highest. Book One explicates the

elemental, natural world, with magical practices designed to reach the second or celestial world. These practices are a search for occult stellar virtues in natural objects, such as plants or metals with special powers. An important source of alchemy can be found there. Kabbalah also works magic in this natural world, with the precise manipulation of Hebrew letters lifting the practitioner to celestial levels.

Agrippa's essential practice is repeated in his other two books. Book Two shows how celestial magic lifts the practitioner to the highest level, where ceremonial or religious magic is practiced. Book Two focuses on astral magic, with Agrippa providing individual art works to attract the power of specific planets. Yates defines such art as a talisman. We quote several of her descriptions (page 135). Yates is, of course, quoting from Agrippa.

One image of Saturn is "a man with a stag's head, camel's feet, on a throne or on a dragon, with a sickle in the right hand, an arrow in the left." An image of Sol is "a crowned king on a throne, a crow at his bosom, a globe under his feet robed in yellow." An image is "a girl with loose hair wearing long white robes, holding in the right hand a branch of laurel or an apple or a bunch of flowers, in the left hand a comb."

No one handles this material better than Dame Frances. These images are reminiscent of the Tarot and obscure alchemical engravings. They could also be emblems, a Renaissance art form with magical connotations. An emblem was a cryptic picture, filled with odd symbolic figures and background. This illustration appeared on one side of the emblem book. On the opposite side, a cryptic poem appeared, which strangely enough, would explain the

illustration. Otherwise the picture could not be fathomed. But emblems get more complicated—and magical—if done well, which did not happen very often. Still, many tried. Not only was the illustration unclear without the accompanying poem, but for the emblem to be truly effective, the poem also cannot be understood without the picture. Both are required for the emblem, the genre name for this overall configuration, to make clear and meaningful sense. Bringing the poem and picture together was a uniting of significant sympathies or correspondences, and that is a good description of magic.

This concept began in 1410 with the discovery of mysterious drawings and hieroglyphics from ancient Egypt, the land and time of the ultimate priest-god-magus, called Thoth or Hermes Trismegistus. Obviously Agrippa knew this. He could not decipher the hieroglyphics, nor could his friend Trithemius, who might have had the best chance of any Western European in the early 1500s. If the hieroglyphics could have been translated, perhaps the curious Egyptian pictures could have been understood. The theory behind the magic in emblem books was strongly reinforced. Agrippa would not have lost sight of all this when he created those strange, elusive, astral figures which Yates quoted. Agrippa had provided half the emblem: the cryptic picture without the poem. Yet he did not need the poem for he identified his subject. As an emblem writer, he stood on solid ground. His long friendship with Trithemius guarantees he knew about the European-wide effort to crack the hieroglyphics. If Agrippa made a major effort at this, we would not be surprised.

Agrippa's Book Three contains the highest magic, a religion of the mind, ideally to be practiced by priests living in a community of priests, the community most likely to hold society together. Agrippa puts together a ten-step ladder to cause the

religious miracles necessary to leap those final steps from the uppermost limits of the cosmos to the Creator of all that has gone before. For Agrippa, ten was not an arbitrary number. Nothing is ever truly arbitrary with him. He always has his facts and reasons. His definition of facts would never hold up under scientific scrutiny.

Ten was a sacred number for Pythagoras, but Agrippa had higher reasons. He revered both the hierarch of ten angels, as set forth by Pseudo-Dionysius, and the structure of ten divine virtues called the Sephiroth, as set forth by Kabbalah. He combined the hierarchy of ten with the structure of ten. This is magic. His urgent mind sought and found as many sympathies between the two tens as his great gift for similarities could come up with. He could not be faulted too much if he believed the Creator was listening closely. His methods would never find a better subject to work on and develop. He had become his own Diotima. Yet he was not a Platonist. He was too much the bull in the china shop for that. But no matter how many precious objects he might crack and knock over, he always had an assured sense of direction.

Chapter Twenty-six:

The Pathbreaking Life of Paracelsus

This chapter is about Paracelsus, who grabbed the torch from Ficino's Florence and carried it further than any natural philosopher in the sixteenth century. He greatly advanced Ficino's two combined roles as priest-physician, which allowed the Florentine to write so eloquently about magic. Paracelsus was born in 1493, six years before Ficino died. These two names are not often linked together, but our study of Paracelsus will show why they should be. Ficino's works provided a solid theoretical basis for alchemy, combining Thrice-Great Hermes, several Neo-Platonic writers, small bits of Pythagoras and Orpheus, and of course Plato himself. Paracelsus felt all these influences profoundly, and he could not have found them brought together in such a large convenient package without Ficino.

Paracelsus was a practicing physician who combined medieval alchemical practices with new techniques in his laboratory, an original alchemy based on ever-increasing knowledge through carefully controlled experiments based on chemistry. He was an iatrochemist, meaning he sought chemical remedies through alchemy to cure patients who had taken ill. He

was not seeking to turn copper into gold, but he would consider if either metal had precise chemical properties that might aid in healing.

Because alchemy relies on variations of heat and processes endlessly repeated, we can call what Paracelsus was doing alchemy. Surely he used the word with bold and daring confidence, to explain both his lab and the cosmos. His experiments explored not only metals, but also minerals, plants of all kinds, numerous herbs, dung from every animal he could get his hands on. His brilliant energy could turn the ridiculous into the sublime. The term for such a chemical physician was iatrochemist, and Paracelsus was by far the most famous of his century. It might truly be said he invented the role. Alchemy would not find such a brilliant mind until Robert Boyle, a century later.

Writers on Paracelsus are faced with two immediate problems: his name and the authenticity of the many works attributed to him. Paracelsus was a pen name. He was born Philippus Aureolus Theophratus Bombastus von Hohenheim, in a small country town near Zurich. He was Swiss-German, and he would travel Europe speaking an odd dialect that was never easy to understand. Still, this did not keep him from talking. Given an audience of any size with a potential interest in his iatrocchemical ideas, he would talk. But that original name—too long for the title page of the many books Paracelsus would publish, rather offsetting for a thinker who desired to reach the common people, an unnecessary mouthful under any conditions. A change was required. Celsus was a healer-philosopher in antiquity, when Rome was still holding on to its final centuries of glory. Celsus is not so easy to date, and that might be why Paracelsus chose him. To be greater than Celsus is Para-celsus, and hence our hero had his new

name, an apt successful choice, by which he would always be remembered.

Our second problem is how to authenticate many writings published in the Renaissance, and long afterwards, with Paracelsus' name on the title page. Paracelsus was a prolific writer. A current scholarly edition of his collected works now numbers twenty volumes with no end in sight. Many works are in dispute. Paracelsus added to the problem by often contradicting himself about basic facts of his alchemical theory, and by writing under a guise of different speakers: alchemist, angry attacker of the hidebound scholastics, preacher of Christian sanctity, protector from gnomes and sylphs in haunted midnight graveyards.

Are all these voices Paracelsus? How to choose? How to tell? Adding to the difficulty, Paracelsus wrote in German, an unusual scholarly language for his time. Latin was still the accepted currency of scholars. Paracelsus' German was often tinged with his own peculiar Swiss dialect, or so it would have seemed to his dutiful followers attempting to translate him. Paracelsus died in 1541, two years before the passing of Copernicus. Paracelsus had only a tiny portion of his immense writings published while he lived, so he could have been no help to future editors and translators. Openings did exist for plagiarists to concoct their own theories and use Paracelsus' name. Surely this did happen. It was not a hanging offense and did not require great courage. It is unlikely the plagiarist thought he would be causing problems 450 years later.

Our decision is no definitive remark can be made about the quasi- or pseudo-Paracelsian works. We are far too late in the game for a handwriting analysis or an eyewitness to cry foul. The second step of our decision is, this is no serious problem. The genuine writings of Paracelsus provide a clear and detailed

description of his cosmic iatrochemistry. We are on solid ground in knowing what the man stood for. Several followers, acting honorably by using their actual name, differed from their master often long after his death; but this again can be no problem, for this is how empirical science works and can only be expected.

The most contentious work in the Paracelsus canon is *The Archidoxes of Magic*, which contains three parts. Throughout it is an interesting read, but that is not how we made our decision. *The Archidoxes* had a wide readership until Robert Boyle transformed alchemy into chemistry, and all these readers thought they were reading the profoundly influential Paracelsus, including his exhortating to the devout Christian life and specific step-by-step chemical recipes. The *Archidoxes* played an important role in Paracelsian history, and therefore should always be included in the canon. This states our criteria; with Paracelsus, we are dealing with his long and lasting influence, rather than only what he accomplished in his lifetime. A century after Boyle, Goethe would become a strong admirer of Paracelsus, who somehow never disappears for too long. If Goethe read *The Archidoxes*, then so should we.

What exactly are Paracelsus' beliefs and accomplishments? No Renaissance thinker ever put more sustained emphasis into the microcosm-macrocosm concept, which shall appear many times in these pages. For Paracelsus, this belief was part of the air he breathed. Man was the ultimate microcosm and all aspects of the cosmos—sublunar and above, plant, animal, mineral, sun, snow, rain—could be found contained in man, even though in the tiniest, imperceptible quantities. The cosmos had been created for man, out of the ceaseless emanation of God's love, and so each part of the cosmos, no matter how minute, is contained in man. The cosmos was a gigantic chemical process, which could be imitated

in part in the alchemist's lab, and this would forever give Paracelsus something to work with. Opening Genesis was an alchemical process, with the Creator making separation of different chemical types of water, just like an alchemist. God was the supreme all-powerful alchemist, and man was but his humble imitator.

This imitator could accomplish considerable wonders in his alchemical lab, and this leads to the Paracelsian belief that especially effects reading poetry. Paracelsus does not concern himself with whether God created ex nihilo or all the matter was there from the start. Paracelsus did have a practical side, and he surely knew this metaphysical query was one he could never figure out. But Paracelsus did believe firmly, unremittingly, that all matter—rock, stone, weed, butterfly—was alive, not in the simple sense of breathing and growing and reproducing, for this was much too easy, but alive with an innate divinity, provided by God, for there can be no other source.

Paracelsus next believed each spectrum of divine matter is related to every other spectrum; he regards this as a logical outcome of his thesis of the divine interiority of matter, for if all stones and planets and comets hold divinity, then truly they are connected. No magus ever held such a wide array of correspondences. All objects have occult connections to all other objects. This is Newton's gravity without the math. Paracelsus would have been lost looking at a single page of Newton's math, a single theorem.

What mattered to Paracelsus was he worked with divinely infused substances in his alchemical lab. He patiently worked these substances through processes that imitated opening Genesis. He was a physician. He was a man of God intent on healing the people of God. He held magical powers with various chemicals, and a

poet operating within this belief system, seeking to find fresh and original combinations of words, which is what our best poets do, will always be using nouns infused with divine power. Prospero is not the only poet to possess high magical powers. To follow Paracelsus' system, this gift is possessed by all Shakespeare's characters, all Marlowe's, all Goethe's. But the magnificent gift is not confined to playwrights. Our lyric poets in volume two will hold it: Spenser, Donne, Marvell, Milton.

The poet did not need to have a large marble bust of Paracelsus on his writing table. Paracelsus' ideas were in the air, much like Freud's theories in the first four decades of the twentieth century. Paracelsus considered all objects to be sacred, and poets had no choice but to write about objects. When a poet achieves a brilliantly original metaphor—for example, Donne's flea—he becomes a magus of language, or so a devoted Paracelsian would have thought, and the numerous volumes bearing his name indicate there were many of those.

Paracelsus approached astrology in a similar manner to Ficino, his ultimate mentor. Ficino, a priest, needed to stay out of trouble from Vatican authorities. Hence he explained how astrological medicines work, a how-to-do-it text, but he was careful not to advocate actually doing it. Ficino walked his wavering tightrope successfully, for he never suffered arrest or censorship. Paracelsus acted similarly. He connected each of the seven planets to a particular interior part of the human body. Hence each planet can assist healing an ailing body part. Paracelsus' choices seem arbitrary, but they are exact proclamations. Jupiter heals the liver; the moon is especially helpful to the brain, thereby reversing the tradition of associating the moon with lunacy; the sun shines its guiding light to the heart; Saturn helps the spleen, thereby acting at a considerable distance; Mercury's swiftness at

comparative close range helps the lungs; and, Venus, the traditional symbol of poetic love, helps the kidneys.

Ficino had never been close to this specificity. He might not have dared. Paracelsus was seldom accused of lack of daring. He once burned the medical works of Avicenna in the city square in Basle. This would not endear Paracelsus to the local university authorities, who taught Avicenna as their primary medical source. But Avicenna represented the old, the pre-medieval, and Paracelsus saw himself as the inspired prophet of all things new—hence the burning. Paracelsus needed a new teaching position, another segment in the pattern in his long, wandering, nomadic life. He has often been called the Luther of medicine. Both were contemporaries, wrote in German, and revolted against the status quo.

Paracelsus' use of planets differed from the European universities' two titans of medicine, Avicenna (980-1037) and Galen (129-199). Galen was by far the more towering figure. Basle just happened to have an old-fashioned, scholastic medical college that favored Avicenna, and so his works went to the flames. Some accounts of this event insist Paracelsus tossed a few volumes of Galen onto his bonfire for good measure. Like Ficino, Paracelsus was careful, rare for him, about the planets. His seven planets could foresee what would happen to its specific body part, but they could not—all by their lonesome—control it. Hence Paracelsus writes a complex, detailed passage on astrological medicine, with an emphasis and specificity that has no predecessor, and then diminishes and mutes his entire concept.

How to explain this? Like Ficino, Paracelsus could have feared censors of the inquisition. Burning Avicenna and Galen was not limiting the power of God—those two writers were not even Christian—but permitting Jupiter to heal the liver, with no

traditional divine interference could be dangerous to the author, or at least problematic. But a better explanation can be found in Paracelsus' own personal method of theorizing. He speaks with boundless confidence, never tiring of harsh verbal assaults on his opponents, and yet his finely-tuned methods sometimes lack consistency. He is a painter of great canvases rather than small miniatures. The difference between Jupiter healing the liver, or merely predicting that healing, appears hair-splitting of too fine a texture to modern ears.

Paracelsus would not have seen the problem. The planets certainly had power, but certainly not total power. Otherwise God finds Himself removed from the picture; a deep knee-bent reverence to the Creator is one solid consistency throughout Paracelsus' corpus. So whatever the planets are doing, God is behind them, and what more need we know than that? Giving the planets' total power would also push Paracelsus out of the picture, and how could he write all those books and perform all those alchemical experiments if that were true? Besides his reverence to the Creator, Paracelsus' other consistency is to place himself and his copious opinions center stage. Have we cleared up his beliefs on astrology? Certainly not. Nor do we know precisely what Ficino believed of the planets and stars. But we have gained some vital insights into how Paracelsus' mind worked; he was master of grand theory of the cosmos, above and below, and thereby could not be bothered with small pitiful details like just how ailing does a human liver have to be before Jupiter lends a hand.

The medical thinker whom Paracelsus had to overcome was Galen, who had dominated European medical schools ever since they had come to be, about a century before Ficino. When Ficino entered medical school, he arduously studied both Galen and astrology, and he would not have found that odd, probably never

gave it a second thought, for his medical school also taught nothing could possibly happen in a patient's body without the direct consent of God. Paracelsus would have emphatically agreed with that last statement. We have little evidence that Ficino actually treated patients and no evidence he had his own alchemical lab. By contrast, Paracelsus treated hundreds of patients, perhaps thousands—he was a working physician—and we can give no precise records because all viable papers have been lost through time, if such records ever existed. Paracelsus was an actively working alchemist, who left behind specific recipes of his experiments.

Ficino lived his entire life in Florence, where he was an admired and beloved figure. Paracelsus habitually offended the people where he lived—the burning of books is but one colorful example—and consequently was forced to exit towns because he had become so unpopular. He had his many devoted followers, but he also had angry townsmen threatening him with tar 'n feathers. So he moved on. The number of places he lived is like a small telephone directory. He could not debate without a loud, heated voice. He could not debate without insulting. In all these character traits and frequent exits, he has much in common with Giordano Bruno, who entered the European scene a generation later. Paracelsus' long original name contained Bombastus, which might have been quickly forgotten if not for its owner's overly forceful, obnoxious oratory. Bombast became a noun, rather useful. An unpleasant speaker with a rude deafening voice has caused bombast.

Galen had one medical theory. His reputation would fall if the theory could be proven wrong, and Paracelsus meant to do exactly that. Galen believed all human health required the management of four, internal bodily humours: phlegm, blood,

yellow bile, black bile. These terms have no defining medical meaning; if Galen originally thought them up, he did so in a completely arbitrary manner. Galen's term blood has no connection with the blood that William Harvey wrote about, nor the blood all people experience when they prick their finger. In Galen, an imbalance in blood meant the patient had too much cold in his body. A proper balance of these four humours was essential for the management of good health. Phlegm stood for heat, yellow bile stood for wet, and black bile stood for dry. Too much heat and the patient is phlegmatic, and has an unhappy tendency to be hot-tempered or angry. A phlegmatic patient requires immediate medical treatment, for he is unlikely to win friends or influence people.

Galen and his millennium of followers gave more consideration to an imbalance of black bile. An adequate amount of black bile results in a contemplative, studious person, eager to learn and explore new intellectual worlds. This of course is a very good thing, but maintaining a stable level of black bile is precarious, for black bile has a tendency to fluctuate suddenly, and this will cast the scholar into a deep, morbid depression. Renaissance writers would have called this melancholy. Hamlet is often called the melancholy Dane, though Hamlet has far more problems than a mere imbalance of humours. Albrecht Dürer created a masterpiece of the engraver's art to depict an allegory of melancholy. The planet Saturn and thereby the ponderously heavy metal lead were associated with painful fluctuations of the black bile. The other three humours have their own astrological associations.

Lest we forget, these four humours exist nowhere in the human body. Since medical students, from Galen to Ficino, almost never dissected a body, the absence of these humours would

neither have been noticed nor commented on. As Galen moved through the middle ages, he had become a sacred text, like a minor evangelist, a major representative of antiquity's golden age, which could never be duplicated or repeated. His words could not be challenged, and the young Paracelsus, just out of his teens, was about to do just that.

The middle ages produced another sacred writer from antiquity, from six centuries before Galen, and that made his writings all the golden. Of course this is Aristotle. No other thinker was more admired in the four European centuries before Paracelsus than Aristotle. Europe had received Aristotle from the Moslems in the turbulent decades following the first crusade in the early twelfth century. This great transmission of knowledge might be the only positive event to come out of that bloody crusade. European scholars swiftly learned Arabic so they could even more swiftly translate Aristotle into good, clean medieval Latin, the lingua franca of educated Europe.

The best minds of early medieval Europe at once found Aristotle the most magnificent and complete of thinkers—not a subject existed under the sun that Aristotle did not thoroughly discuss in a well-organized tract, and these were the subjects of logic and biology and cosmology, subjects which Europe had not given much thought to since before Rome fell. Now it had all come back, unexpectedly, suddenly, like a great new star on the horizon, and that star was a single writer, surely the greatest intellect who had ever lived, surely the greatest intellect who would ever live. Thomas Aquinas, whose life spanned the thirteenth century, spent that life proving—Aquinas was always proving—that no conflict existed between the copious writings of Aristotle and Catholic Church teaching, which included both church councils and holy

scripture. All truth is one, proclaimed Aquinas, and that truth on this earth had never been expressed more fully than Aristotle.

Paracelsus would demolish the four humours of Galen, but he would take cautious heed in approaching the four principles of Aristotle. These principles proclaimed all created matter beneath the moon was made of four corporeal entities: earth, air, fire, water. Each of these entities had two properties—hot, cold, wet, dry—and that meant an entity would have properties in common. This is where Paracelsus would have pricked up his ears. What Aristotle revealed was entities pulling apart and coming back together again, and this sounded very much like chemistry. Aristotle never worked in a lab—the concept would never have occurred to him—and he taught his entities did their coming apart and combining all on their own. Like a lab, a Supreme Being would never have crossed Aristotle's mind.

How does his method work? Very simply. Paracelsus would surely have thought it was all too simple. Air is dry and cold. Water is wet and cold. Both have cold in common. Hence they are interchangeable. If water gets too hot, it will evaporate and turn to air. If air gets too cold, rain will fall from the sky. A child with a toy chemistry set would be working at a higher level, probably much higher. But the child would not have Aquinas and other gravely serious church fathers standing behind him. The child's detailed writing about his four principles would not have been taught for 450 years in all major European universities—and the child most likely would not have thought of Aristotle's aether, also called the quintessence. Paracelsus used the term quintessence in a significantly new way, which requires our careful definition of terms.

Unlike Paracelsus, Aristotle never saw divinity in his four principles, which is one of the main reasons he is not a poet's

philosopher. Our contention is our three volume study of Ficino's influence is poets did feel their art uplifted by magic, that poetry was a divine or magical art, with an inspired passage holding the possibility of reaching the highest level of Diotima's ascent. A person could take on no greater undertaking than writing verse. This volume covers Shakespeare and Marlowe, but the hallowed list in subsequent volumes covers Spenser to Milton, Shelley to Yeats. Ficino's enduring influence could not have happened if he was not also served by natural philosophers, and Paracelsus never stopped admiring the little physician-priest of Florence, nor sharing his belief in the divinity of all creation.

Divinity was not a word that Aristotle would have felt comfortable with, but he did strongly believe creation contained a vast supernal realm. This would seem to contract his four mundane principles, but let Aristotle hold the floor a little longer. When Paracelsus was a young man, Aristotle firmly held the floor and dominated discussion on all serious matters. Aristotle believed all objects above the moon—sun, moon, stars, planets, comets, space itself—was composed of a miraculously fine and subtle substance called aether. All creation below the moon is conveniently called sublunar. Since aether is the fifth substance, Aristotle sometimes called it the quintessence. We need note this cosmology is entirely original with Aristotle and based on no actual finding.

Why did Aristotle select the moon, a constantly moving object, as the dividing line between his aether and those four physical principles which meant so much to him? No possible investigation could have told him this. Hence his cosmos is a work of the imagination, not scientific structure. Aristotle was a far better biologist. He could study the innards of cows and pigs by sticking his hands inside them to find out whatever might be there. Then he wrote down what his hands told him. This was as close as

Aristotle ever got to a true scientific method. He could not take apart all the material substances around him to prove his four principles; no man could ever live that long, and besides, his four principles are abstractions, so he could not have taken apart a plant or slab of shale to prove an abstraction.

Aristotle's troubles multiply, since he never considered he might be dealing with abstractions. Mud was mud, hail was hail—how could they possibly be abstractions. True, mud and hail contained parts, no matter how tiny, of all four mundane principles, and that alone should abolish the notion they were abstractions. A triangle drawn neatly in the sand was an abstraction, but the four principles making up the sand were bursting with reality. Otherwise sand could not be changed into mud or hail. Only a fool would try to change hail into a triangle. Definitions matter. Definitions are life.

Yet no matter how carefully and precisely Aristotle defined aether, he could never escape the all-too-glaring fact that his precious supralunar substance only had existence in his own head. This explains why Aristotle's cosmos was so easy to demolish when Galileo (1564-1642) turned his powerful telescope on the night-time sky, and supported these findings with notebook after notebook of brilliant mathematical calculations. Had Galileo and Paracelsus been contemporaries, the great Italian might have found much to admire in the bombastic German. This statement might shake up modern historians of science, who revere Galileo and are hesitant to take Paracelsus seriously. But both men worked in abstractions and thought in abstractions, and thereby were comrades in upsetting, truly crushing, the long reign of Aristotle over educated European minds.

Galileo dedicated decades of his life to working out thought problems, frequently supplemented with simple but profound

experiments used to study motion by rolling small metal balls up and down a varied series of wooden ramps which he had designed and made himself. The laws of motion Galileo derived from these seemingly humble methods he could look upward and turn on the planets. Hence what worked for small metal balls would also work for Mars and Jupiter. These scientific breakthroughs were of extraordinary significance, and Galileo's laws of motion still hold today.

For all his achievements, Paracelsus cannot stand in the front rank of great scientists like Galileo. Only a handful of men can. But Paracelsus introduced chemistry into the preparation of medicines, and physicians who understood his methods have never looked back. He significantly improved the treatment of syphilis, a new and frightening disease swiftly ravaging Europe, assaulting lords and commoners, and Paracelsus' carefully prepared compounds of mercury often brought relief and sometimes complete and lasting cures. This alone would set him apart from any physician in his century, but he did more. He had served as surgeon to a mobile army, and discovered that battle wounds cure from the inside-out. This original insight, combined with a fierce insistence on regular, fresh, clean dressing for the wound, relieved much suffering and saved many lives. Paracelsus was a very early supporter of compassion and specialized medical care for the mentally ill; we cannot admire him too much for that.

He had been exposed to the Fugger mines as a very young man, and his brilliant powers of observation taught him that miners suffer from diseases specific to their profession—hence other professions would cause their own diseases specific to their labors. This latter discovery seems so obvious, and yet no one had considered the matter before Paracelsus. Once he understood the specific ailment, he could work in his lab for a specific chemical

remedy, and thereby relieve more suffering and prevent more suffering.

The reader will note that none of Paracelsus's brilliantly original successes as a physician bears the slightest resemblance with Galen's four humours. A coal miner might have all his yellow and black bile working nicely, but he gets ill from daily—over several years—breathing great clouds of coal dust. When Paracelsus made this fact known, the hidebound academies roared their disapproval because the brash newcomer had disagreed with Galen, and this was simply not allowed. If Paracelsus had corrected one of the evangelists, he could not have been more unpopular.

Galen, to his credit, did have more than one medical idea. He staunchly believed opposites healed, and the young whippersnap Paracelsus could not have disagreed more. If Galen observed a patient suffering from chills, he would require no further diagnosis. If the patient is cold, he needs to be made warm, with all possible speed. So the patient would be placed before a roaring fireplace, wrapped in thick blankets, and spoon-fed scalding hot soup. The patient would be relieved of his chills, but he could still be quite ill, for the cause of the chills was never considered, other than Galen's confident notion that a disobedient humour needed rectified. Surely many patients must have died with a belly full of good soup.

It is hard to believe Galen's theory of humours actually cured anyone who was seriously ill, and harder to believe Galen's long reign over European medical faculties, which taught physicians to heal at a distance. The patient's troublesome symptoms were written on a card and handed to the physician, who never saw the patient and most likely never knew his name. It would be nice to think he knew the patient's gender. Anyhow, the

physician carefully read the symptoms with furrowed brow, and wrote out a specific course of treatment. If the patient has a fever, cover him with ice. If his limbs tremble, hold them still. If he has trouble breathing, set him outside in the good fresh air.

Paracelsus believed like cures like. This sounds simplistic, but he was on the straight correct path that would in 250 years lead to an understanding of the immune system when Edward Jenner in 1784 developed the vaccine that would end smallpox. Jenner also believed like cures like. He was an English country doctor, with extraordinary powers of observation. In a time when smallpox was a fearful calamity that could repeatedly ravage the same isolated country village, Jenner was the first to notice a person who got the dreaded smallpox and then recovered, alas with a few scars, would never get the disease again. Even if this one-time victim was confined in a small village where the next smallpox outbreak caused multitudes of sufferers to drop like flies, this survivor would never again be afflicted. Hence he had developed an immunity, a new word in medical parlance.

Jenner knew he was onto something, something fantastically big. If he could treat a healthy person, never afflicted, with a very weak strain of the pox, that patient would be ill, quite uncomfortably so, for about three days. Afterwards all would be fine. The patient's immune system had been effectively put to work, forever activated, and could now swiftly, efficiently, completely, shut down any smallpox invasion. Like cures like. Jenner would have thought Galen's humours as crazy as Paracelsus did. Many successful vaccines have been developed since 1784, but Jenner was the first. He originated the concept and mastered it, and yes, he might have felt a strong grudging respect for Paracelsus.

If Paracelsus treated a patient with mercury poisoning—it is odd to think how often this must have happened—he perfected a cure with a severely diluted form of mercury. In his time, he was as revolutionary as Jenner, though a paltry few in his time knew it. If Paracelsus treated a patient from a snake bite, he used as medicine a much-diluted form of the snake's venom. His patients got well. He had equal success with patients bitten by salamanders, though it is hard to think of salamanders being ferocious. But again, like cures like, and we find Paracelsus a most versatile iatrochemist. He did get people well, not every time, no doctor does, but his healing percentage rate had to be immeasurably higher than his contemporary Galenist who never saw his patient. Obviously the Galenist would have been little help at a difficult childbirth. If a Galenist ever did heal anyone, the credit must go to Nature's own magnificent powers of healing—if only the Galenist was too proud or slothful to leave his private estate and get in the way.

Galen did feel the need to write a passage about the human heart as a key section of his medical writings. But the notion of dissecting a human corpse was horribly distasteful to him, so instead he chose a sheep. Hence his medical text provides an accurate drawing and description of a sheep's heart. No academic thought to question this during the middle ages because human dissections were simply not done. But in the Renaissance a medical college allowed a human dissection to take place, with Galen's sheep drawing placed beside the corpse. The medical professors and students were astonished—shocked would not be too strong a word—at the numerous differences, size, shape, location, between Galen's heart and the human heart placed before them.

Only one conclusion was possible: since Galen could never be wrong, never, not at all, about anything, then Galen's heart was the correct one and the human heart was somehow, curiously, mysteriously, wrong. Having kept Galen firmly placed on his pedestal, they required an explanation for the genuine heart before them. They decided oddities did appear in nature—everyone had seen a cow or dog with three legs, or a human child born with a deformed limb, immensely tragic but all too true—and so this puzzling heart before them must fall into the category of oddities. Nature does not always get everything right—a familiar local cat was blind and kept bumping into things—and this corpse's heart was a sad mistake of Nature. After all, what else could it be? Neither professor nor students even considered Galen could be wrong, for that would be like doubting scripture. The only wonder was this corpse had lived as long as it had with a defective heart. That might require some intense consideration. It sure could not have been easy.

If Paracelsus had heard this story, he might have sat up all night laughing—he never did anything by halves—except his attention would soon have focused on whether the poor corpse could have lived longer with proper medical care. Then his laughter would be replaced by anger, for his mood shifts could be mercurial, an adjective he would have far preferred to bombastic. Paracelsus obliterated Galen, but he held onto Aristotle's four mundane principles, though in ways that would have shocked the mighty Greek. First Paracelsus changed the four principles into abstractions which can tell us something about the different properties. When Aristotle meant fire, he truly meant fire. When he lit a candle, that was fire.

Paracelsus defined fire very differently: fire was a permanent quality in matter that allows for quick and sudden

changes to occur, especially when steady heat is applied. Obviously Paracelsus is thinking about alchemy, a complex process far beyond Aristotle's reach. Aristotle explained the cosmos by long careful meditation, meaning the one and only source of information was his own mind. Paracelsus preferred to spend long, regular hours in his alchemical lab. No pictures or drawings exist of his lab—if only Dürer had made an engraved study—but we can be sure it was fully equipped. Paracelsus' numerous experiments would have found Aristotle's conception of matter to be hopelessly simplistic. He at once abolished the aether. What chemical reactions occur below the moon will also occur in all the farthest reaches above it.

Paracelsus also did away with Aristotle's notion that each principle had two qualities: hot, cold, wet, dry. Again Paracelsus had quickly learned these terms held no connection with his careful alchemical experiments. He realized medieval alchemists relied on those four qualities as a hopeful basis for the transmutation of metals. Paracelsus did not take time to ridicule this, though he knew changing water to ice had no chemical connection to transmutating lead to gold. He was the rare alchemist not seeking gold—what actually could you do with the stuff anyway—but seeking lasting medical cures. Aristotle's mundane principles became convenient terms for the interior qualities of matter. The term microscopic would apply, except Paracelsus never saw a microscope. Matter has a solidity and earth becomes the useful term, with no connection to the earth Aristotle walked upon with his new pair of sandals. Space exists within the most condensed matter and therefore air makes a useful term. The loose qualities of matter can be called water. We have already discussed fire.

Paracelsus used quintessence in his own special way, with no connection with Aristotle's aether, which he equaled with a

non-existent pixie dust. In Paracelsus' system, the four mundane qualities can, at times, combine in certain specific ways to form the quintessence, a compound matter of rare beauty and power. Unfortunately Paracelsus does not provide a detailed description of his quintessence, which we can assume was a medicine of the highest order. Why else would Paracelsus pay such emphasis to it? He would not be concerned if it could turn lead to gold, or copper to silver. That was never what he was about. He was first and foremost a healer, and combining all four mundane principles must hold the potential for great healing power.

A major frustration in reading Paracelsus is knowing precisely what he meant by his terms, especially what terms he held in priority. This is no simple matter and no solid conclusion exists. Before Paracelsus, alchemists insisted two prime elements existed in their work: sulphur and mercury. These two elements can be traced back to medieval handbooks on alchemy, and different writers assuredly meant different things by them. But the handbooks that influenced Paracelsus would have used sulphur and mercury as basic components of matter, much closer to the neutron and electron than the two simple chemicals that could be purchased at any apothecary's shop. Paracelsus, always the innovator, added a third basic component to matter, which he termed salt. For practicing alchemists in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, Paracelsus' third element was a revolutionary concept. Matter now had three basic components, and neither medicine nor gold could be produced without adhering to this new principle.

Paracelsus shows his adherence to both Ficino and Aristotle in his final decisions. It is difficult, next to impossible, to know which thinker Paracelsus finds more useful in his many chemical experiments. His three components make a solid connection or

correspondence with Ficino's Neo-Platonic trinity of soul, mind, body. He is working in an occult world, the only world he knew.

Paracelsus is again reinforcing the lasting strength of the brilliantly original metaphors of the great poets who would come after him. Manifold, seemingly endless, connections, are the way the cosmos works, and so surely the most gifted poets should write that way. Poets of the human soul, like Donne, Marlowe, Coleridge, did not require a portrait of Paracelsus on the wall beside their writing table to be distant inheritors of his influence. Marlowe is the odd case of the poet who did not believe in the human soul and yet wrote so eloquently about it; his most famous character Faustus is a scholar-physician who seeks to open all the connecting doors of magic.

Paracelsus connected sulphur with soul and mercury with spirit. But matter has a solid, often imperishable substance, like the human body, and Paracelsus held all these facets together with the innovation of his new third term, which he called salt. He was not talking about table salt, not any more than he was referring to the genuine chemical mercury which he used in small diluted portions to cure poisons. Instead he was seeking the three innate qualities which matter must have, and which connects all matter to the human person. Both matter and humans were created by the same all-encompassing Deity—Paracelsus never for a moment lost his faith in that—and so common features should be expected. Paracelsus must have wondered why no alchemist had thought of this before.

It would seem Paracelsus no longer had any use for Aristotle's four, mundane, sublunar principles. But this was not the case. Paracelsus believed Aristotle's four principles—earth, air, fire, water—could somehow consistently be interrelated with his own inspired trio of sulphur, mercury, and salt. In his alchemical

lab, the four can influence the three, or it is the three can influence the four or only the quintessence formed of the four, or are all seven parts somehow interchangeable? Paracelsus never provides a clear, firm, defining answer to these questions, and when we talked about his lack of clarity on basic principles, this is what we meant.

Paracelsus himself most likely did not see the problem, and consistency of theory is not his strong point when a reader engages in the vast bulk of his writings. But he is firm on the three and four basics without explaining how a practicing alchemist might use them—and that might strongly hint at the answer. Paracelsus was a constantly working alchemist, and so what seemed obvious or second nature to him, he would assume a similar response in the reader. Even his alchemical texts that read like detailed recipe books do not provide assistance. Hence in Paracelsus, we have a magus-chemist-physician who believed he had the potential to take the cosmos apart and put it back together again. He makes grandiose statements unlike any other Renaissance magus. Only Giordano Bruno is comparable in the self-exaltation of his own, unique, personal powers.

Paracelsus wrote his own handbook, *The Archidoxes of Magic*, which contained four sections with basic descriptions of the magus art: alchemy, the occult, magic, a recipe book of alchemical concoctions. Scholars debate if Paracelsus actually wrote this work. If it had been written by a follower of the master, it contains basic Paracelsian teachings, and yet we are still wondering how exactly he merged his theories with Aristotle. Perhaps Paracelsus changed his mind each time something surprising and new happened in the alembic, like a poet discovering a fresh original image each time he composed a line. The *Archidoxes* talks about the effectiveness of voodoo dolls, which can cause harm at a distance, and a man who lived many years with fresh clumps of

earth on his chest, with the nourishing powers of the dirt somehow working its way inside him. This is, of course, patent nonsense. So is the long section about pygmies, gnomes, and sylphs protecting precious metals underground.

If Paracelsus' mind had stayed only in these areas, no one would know his name today. But the wiser side of the man toppled Galen, long overdue, and he was wise enough to hold onto Aristotle, if only for a little longer. His compassion to the mortally ill should never be forgotten. If he did believe in sylphs and gnomes, he totally discounted them as a cause of disease in the human body, for that cause was first and foremost chemical, located in a specific bodily part, to be cured by chemical remedies, plants, minerals, metals, whatever. All these facts were monumental breakthroughs in the history of medicine. Shakespeare refers to him as a major healer in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Paracelsus' honored place is assured. Critics might throw pebbles and stones in his direction, but his statue always stands proud and tall.

Chapter Twenty-seven:

William Adlington, Translator of Elizabethan Times

In 1566, two years after Shakespeare was born, William Adlington had a lasting success with an English prose translation of a minor Latin classic from the late ancient world—*The Golden Asse* by Lucius Apuleius, who lived in the mid second century. If Apuleius' work can be called a novel, it is the only novel to survive antiquity in its entirety.

Lucius Apuleius was born in North Africa, he learned Latin in Rome quite expertly without teacher and he studied at Carthage and Athens. We cannot know what he learned there, presumably large doses of Plato and Aristotle, Epictetus and Epicurus, but his passion was magic, natural magic, demonic magic, in-between stages of magic, whatever, just as long as it was magic. Hence he became a pilgrim in quest of new details of magical knowledge, for he traveled for many years throughout the countries bordering the Mediterranean, seeking and grasping hold of whatever he could find.

Apuleius reportedly translated several Hermetic treatises from Greek into Latin, and thereby makes a connection with Ficino. Sadly these translations are lost, but if they did exist, they

would provide an earlier date for Thrice-Great Hermes than modern scholars are willing to consider. Apuleius was considered both a magus and Platonist in the early 1800s by Thomas Taylor, the friend of Blake, who translated numerous ancient works from Latin or Greek into English. In 1822 Taylor took the Latin original of *The Golden Asse* and made a second English translation. Taylor is an expert translator with genuine literary gifts, but this one time he falls a distant second to William Adlington, who made an important, original contribution to English prose. Therefore, we will refer to the work as Adlington's and carefully explain our reasons. Apuleius wrote his novel in the first person and so Lucius Apuleius is the main character. Henceforth we refer to Lucius as our ever-interesting protagonist. Now that our scorecards are set, we can play this wildly magical game.

The Golden Asse is set in Thessaly, no chance location, for Thessaly is a traditional land of magic and witchcraft, the two themes that dominate the work. The novel is divided into eleven parts, with consecutive chapters running throughout. Lucius only needs to ramble about—the novel is constantly picaresque—three chapters go by in Book One before he encounters a witch named Meroe, who holds a full panoply of Hermetic powers. Adlington is at his best describing those powers.

She is a Magicien, whiche power to rule the Heavens,
to bringe downe the skies to beare up the earth, to turne
the waters into hills, and the hills into running waters,
to lift up the terrestriall spirites into the ayre, and to pull
the Goddes out of the heavens, to extinguishe the
Planete, and to lighten the deepe darkness of hell.

Meroe starts out, rather modestly, as a magus over Aristotle's four sublunar elements: earth, air, fire, water. She can swiftly, truly effortlessly, transmute one element into another on an

impressively large scale. The scale soon gets astoundingly larger. Adlington would not have understood the term exponential, but couple it with magic and there is a fit. Meroe not only controls rivers and mountains, but her powers reach to the distant reaches of the cosmos. She is both microcosm and macrocosm. She holds the complete Neo-Platonic unity within her.

Meroe is a terrifying preview, albeit all in good fun, of all the wicked magical powers Lucius will face in his autobiographical novel. He can only save himself from an endless series of bizarre humiliations and fates worse than death, by finding a stable virtuous magic more powerful than all the evil magics he encounters. Hence the plot structure is the traditional white magic versus black, a value system that Ficino would have found quite familiar since he was the most instrumental figure in founding it.

A cornerstone of the *Corpus Hermetica* is the famous god-making passage, which explains how a powerful Egyptian magus like Trismegistus, though unable to create a god, is nevertheless capable of drawing genuine gods into residing within statues made of stone or clay and carved with human hands. Shakespeare made use of this concept in the close of *A Winter's Tale*, when Paulina turns from statue to human before a dazzled audience on stage. Lifelike statues were a part of magic, as Adlington describes in Book Two, the eighth chapter.

on the toppe whereof weree placed carved statues
and images [on a quadrangle of pillars around a
gate], but principallie the goddesse of Victorie was
so lively and with such excellencie portraide and set
foorth, that you would verily have thought that she
had flied, and hovered and hovered with her winges
hither and thither. On the contrary parte, the image

of goddesse Diana was wrought in white marble, whiche was a marvelous sight to see, for she seemed as if the winde did blowe up her garments, and that she did encounter with them that came into the house: on eche side of her, were Dogges made of stone, that seemed to menace with their firie eies, their pricked ears, their bended nostrilles, and their grinning teeth, in such sort that you would have thought they had bayed and barked.

Other dogs are carved—"the greater mervell ready to behold"—standing on their legs and ready o fight.

Lucius spends more time staring at the fearful dogs than the two goddesses, even though a peek up Diana's skirt is possible. The split second changes from magic to reality constantly confuses him—he can never be all that sure of those dogs. Half the flesh-and-blood women he meets are witches or the witch's assistant, who can also practice dark magic. Lucius can never be quite sure which way to turn around. When he sits still for a while, someone tells him a marvelous story, usually filled with magic, violence, romance, unexpected twists and turns that rove about the countryside. These tales mirror Lucius's life—that he does not die from sheer exhaustion is impressive.

What Adlington has translated has a similar structure to Cervantes' masterpiece, *Don Quixote*, the first installment published in 1605. Cervantes' two immortal characters, the Don and his sidekick Sancho Panzo, lead a comic, picaresque existence, and they never stop at an inn without hearing an interesting story. The Don and Sancho are good listeners. So is Lucius. Unlike Adlington, Cervantes does not permeate his work with sorcery and magic. His scenes are all-to-real which is why they are oh-so-funny. Cervantes lived in Spain at a time when his country was

fiercely opposed to all things English. Reading Adlington might not have been a high priority. Reading Shakespeare or Marlowe might not have been a high priority. Cervantes was forty-one in 1588 during the sad fate of the Spanish Armada, and he must have suffered a private battle fatigue over repeated stories of that glorious Protestant wind.

We are not trying to force a connection between Adlington and Cervantes where none exists. But the wildly, rollicking picaresque format passes over several English generations until the 1740s when Tobias George Smollett (1721-1771) translates the complete *Don Quixote* into English prose, which significantly influenced the first English novelists who would burst forth into unexpected greatness in that decade or shortly thereafter: Henry Fielding, Smollett himself, Laurence Sterne, who published *Tristram Shandy* in 1759. Another major figure who belongs in this group is Daniel Defoe who died in 1731, and who wrote many wonderful, wild, rollicking picaresque novels, most notably *Colonel Jack* and *Moll Flanders*. Moll Flanders avoids the supernatural, but very little else of a troublesome and adventuresome nature escapes her. Like Lucius and Fielding's Jonathan Wilde, she is perpetually interesting.

To read Adlington, not more than fifty pages, is to be reminded of these first English novelists. This places him in very select company, but he does lack the others' brilliant gifts of original characterization. But where Adlington ably precedes them, and perhaps was an important, if faraway influence, is in the robust strength, the verve, the relentless energy, the bouncing comic intensity, the sheer exuberance and controlled erratic zig-zags—all these traits and more define a remarkably original prose, and seems all the more impressive because we do not see it again in English till Smollett's translation. We cannot prove Smollett or any of

England's early great novelists read or studied Adlington. Coincidence is always possible and must always be strongly considered when considering influence. Surely Smollett's translation was a major influence. We can only make educated assumptions about Adlington. But what we cannot prove cannot lessen our admiration.

Lucius' overwhelming problem occurs in Book Three when Fotis, his lovely young paramour, turns him into an asse. Lucius could not love a woman who was free of sorcery. Hence we have the title of the novel, though the golden is ironic. Very little is golden about a vibrant young man suddenly finding himself an asse. Lucius cautiously analyzes his new situation. He can still understand spoken English, just like always; the novel would come to a stop if this changed since of course Lucius is our narrator. He cannot help being comic, no matter how violent and scatological his adventures become.

A reader will be reminded of Bottom, the amateur actor in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bottom has only his head turned into an ass, and the change is far more temporary than Lucius' all-too-difficult situation. In Shakespeare, a lovely queen, human but transfixated by a gentle magic, falls head over heels in love with Bottom the ass, and high comedy results. Bottom enjoys himself, more than ever before, and shows a strong predilection for being stroked by a pretty lady and chewing oats. This mix-up is all in good fun. No one gets hurt, and a nice lady has her pride diminished by a little embarrassment.

Lucius' problems are far more serious. As a young man, he could not keep himself away from witches, though often very pretty. As an asse, he cannot keep away from thieves, vicious bloodthirsty thieves. He becomes their tirelessly overworked beast of burden, lugging about heavy bundles of ill-gotten gain over

endless muddy roads in inclement weather. He is not doing well. He plods along slowly, interminably, and yet enters different adventures in rapid-fire picaresque style. Adlington's swift onflowing rush makes this happen—if he wrote as slowly as the asse walks, the novel would be several thousand pages and have influenced no one.

Lucius' problem is he escapes one ruthless gang of cutthroats only to be captured by another, a little bit harder on him, a little more impatient. He does get a long respite to hear an elderly woman recite the fall of Cupid and Psyche; this is by far the longest tale imbedded in the novel, and by itself could stand as a novella. That old woman is a good talker, but then so are all Adlington's people.

The asse's never-ending adventures take him to the penultimate Book Ten, when he impresses well-to-do people at a dining situation when he cleverly and most surprisingly imitates human habits in eating, drinking, and sitting. The human witnesses exclaim this is no ordinary asse. But Adlington wants to take the comedy further in a rough, somewhat grotesque imitation of Shakespeare. An elegant lady witnesses the asses's culinary skills and feels a strong sexual attraction for him. Lucius had not expected this. The lady pays Lucius' perplexed owner for the asse's sexual services. Lucius surely had not expected that. He began the novel as a young man with a consuming passion for chasing pretty women, and in an odd, strange, ironic sort of way, he has come full circle.

Adlington realizes not much more could possibly happen to his asse, who admittedly has attained glimpses of life's wisdom that he could not have gleaned without the transformation. The adventures are over; if Adlington has not run out of breath, the reader surely has. Adlington now presents a new style of gloriously

rich description, and extensively employs this new resource of language to close his novel with two long scenes. After the asse's unexpected sexual encounter, the dinner turns into a prolonged elaborate masque with dramatic performances by pagan deities. The asse describes all these newfound wonders, as this sustained show of shows concludes Book Ten.

Book Eleven will close with a second extended passage in this new descriptive style. Lucius has always known a mouthful of fresh roses could turn him back into a man. He has never given up on this one hope. He occasionally has gotten near a tempting rose, only to have a brutal unknowing thief yank him away. The magic might work, but poor Lucius never gets a chance.

Early in Book Eleven, beneath a full moon—what else—Lucius has a vivid dream of Isis, the primary goddess of ancient Egypt and the most wondrous worker of all magics. This dream has momentous content, for Isis promises the asse a return quite soon to his full human form. Fully awake and strangely confused, the asse attends a very long procession, very similar to the masque in style and content, with numerous pagan figures, supernal and human, slowly parading before a large attentive audience. The description is lavish, colorful, a veritable kaleidoscope of wondrous entities, and startlingly different from the language employed in the first nine books.

The asse stoops over and eats a rose. Not surprisingly, he is once again fully human, though stark naked and yet another attraction for the glaring crowd. Lucius is quickly covered by a long white robe, a symbol of his future, for the novel closes with Lucius becoming a priest of Isis, with Adlington, the virtuoso of styles, providing the appropriate tone. This ending is pious, reverent, prayerful. Renaissance magic again has taken us through many phases, and we do well to stop here.

Chapter Twenty-eight:

Thomas Norton, Poet Laureate of Alchemy

Thomas Norton composed the most lasting work in verse about alchemy. He was born in 1433 and published *The Ordinal of Alchemy* in 1477. He would live another thirty-six years, or until 1513, without composing anything of note. He was English, through and through English. The *Ordinal* is 3,112 lines of iambic couplets. A Chaucer scholar would have no problem with Norton's language, but the reader who requires a modern translation of Chaucer—such a loss—would need a similar translation of Norton. Translations of Norton do exist, which can be expected of such a popular work.

In 1618 the occultist and alchemist Michael Maier translated the *Ordinal* into Latin. This is an interesting fact but of little use to the modern reader who cannot handle Chaucer. Hope exists in our *Ordinal* in Elizabethan prose, which preserves the meaning while removing the manifold pleasure of Norton's verse. This prose author never left a name, and his effort can be found in volume two of the *Hermetic Museum*, a collection of alchemical treatises from the Elizabethan to Restoration age, collected by Arthur Edward Waite in 1893. Waite was a prolific writer on the

occult, whose deep beliefs in these arcane matters often hindered the necessary scrupulousness of his scholarship. But Waite did single-handedly preserve many valuable writings, and we can be sure he read Norton in the original verse.

Norton's verse can be quite impressive. His iambic lines are smooth, graceful, natural. He writes 1,500 couplets without forcing a rhyme. If the reader knew next to nothing of alchemy before encountering the *Ordinal*, he will have a solid beginner's knowledge after he has carefully read his way through. The *Ordinal* is divided into seven capitulums, or chapters. Norton did not arrive at that number seven by chance. Norton will never use a number by chance. Seven metals grow in the ground, and each metal is looked over by a corresponding planet. The sun and moon counted as planets in Norton's cosmology. Add Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, Earth, and Venus, and Norton gets his essential seven. He wrote a generation before Copernicus.

Norton was one of the countless Renaissance thinkers who used astrology and astronomy interchangeably. If he had found eight or six planets, his concern would have been occult, for his planets must connect solidly with his number of metals. Otherwise his whole alchemical program is wrong. His alchemy contains spiritual grandeur, but requires a rigid numerology. He might have given one planet the work of two, or some such variation; he would have sadly lacked little choice if he meant to keep his system intact.

Norton took most seriously the alchemical precept from the Emerald Tablet: as above, so below. Thrice-Great Hermes wrote a series of sacred alchemical guidelines on this tablet, but the one listed is the most vital, and therefore the one which must always be active for the adept to have a chance of success. This is both occult and hierarchical thinking at their most powerful, and they become

cornerstones of Renaissance and Elizabethan belief systems that hold fast to alchemy but also hold tightly to the great chain of being, Jacob's Ladder, the power of personal prayer, Diotima's ascension process. If a person knew one fact about alchemy, it would be this. If a person trusted one aspect of the occult in his spiritual make-up, this would be it.

Norton explains in clear, vivid verse how all five base or inferior metals—lead, copper, tin, iron, quicksilver (more commonly called mercury in today's parlance)—will change or grow within the earth into the two precious metals, silver and gold. Gold is far preferred to silver, but no one was ever known to throw out a silver bracelet or bar. Each of the seven planets is directed by supernal means—the term magic also works here, since magic also draw entities together—to cause persistently the growth into a higher state of the particular metal below ground under its care. If plants and trees could grow and mature with roots below ground, and the basic Hermetic doctrine stated creation was all, then surely metals could do the same.

Consider lead, the lowest metal but therefore the metal with the greatest potential. Saturn is the outermost planet, or the planet farthest from the earth and thereby connecting with the lead underground.

Norton worked within a Ptolemaic cosmos with Earth solidly, stably placed in the center, unmoving, incapable of being moved; Norton does not write a series of couplets on Ptolemy, but his occult metal-growing system could not work if Earth, source and home base of all these metals, was but another orbiting planet, thereby holding potential to emit influence. Norton's Earth can never give influence, but only receive. It must be in the center so the seven planets know exactly where to reach it. Without that extraordinary convenience, the extraordinary system of metallic

growth and improvement could not be expected to take place so easily. Perhaps it could not be expected to take place at all.

Return to Saturn, which forever shines its powerful occult rays—forever invisible to the human eye—onto all lead underground. The process is slow, painfully slow, seemingly impossibly slow, but never that, for the process will happen, the transmutation process of transforming lead into silver or gold. Norton's era did not think of Earth as more than six thousand years old—if that, for six millennia seemed an incredibly long time, surely time enough for lead to change to the two precious metals. Perhaps some lead changed to silver, and other lead changed to gold. Saturn might keep pushing this all-new silver to turn to gold, but that might not be required. Norton never talks in quantitative terms. Silver is abundantly precious, and Saturn might feel rightfully his work well done.

The same transmutation works with the four other base metals and their respective planets. Consider Mars, which guides iron into silver or gold, or Mercury, which works ceaselessly to transmute quicksilver, always the trickiest of metals, into a precious metal. Jupiter, minus his four moons which would not be discovered by Galileo for fifteen decades, works on tin, and Venus, always a favorite, works on copper. Norton would not have understood the term scientist—indeed he could not possibly have heard it for two centuries—but if he had a simple, clear definition of scientist explained, he would have nodded and emphasized how this is exactly what he was doing.

Silver and gold were occasionally dug out of the ground, metals clearly undisturbed by human hands—and what better proof of the experimental process could there be? If silver required stability underground or advanced to progress to gold, the cause was the shiny white moon, silver's personal planet, perhaps most

beautiful of all. The sun preserved the gold below ground, and perhaps caused this most precious metal to increase in size.

Norton and all alchemists had one problem with this process of planetary transmutation. Of course it worked. Otherwise how could the humble farmer find pebbles or chunks of silver and gold while plowing his field. The farmer would be quick to point out the planets shone brightly over his acreage. This eye-witness evidence surely satisfied the alchemists, who had long ago been convinced how transmutation happens, but their problem remained: relying solely on the planets to get the job done took an incredibly long amount of time, requiring the seeker after precious metals to live to a Biblical age, not likely in an age when sudden unexpected, inexplicable death was common, when plague and neighborhood fires could still make a periodic strike, when a man of forty was considered to have lived quite some time. Yes, the supernal effects of the job were done, but they took too long, unacceptably too long, infuriatingly too long, for a man could live ninety-seven years and lead might still not yet have turned to copper. It might still be lead, though strongly leaning in the right direction.

The solution to this slow-motion problem took place over several centuries, in Western Europe, Islamic countries, and faraway China, and the result came to be known as alchemy, the subject of Norton's *Ordinal* and a great many other literary endeavors, often in verse, in English that followed him. This included English translations of finely-written French verse on alchemy. These works will be discussed in succeeding chapters. In doing so, we are never losing sight of Ficino as our focal point. Without Ficino, Western Europe would have lacked the *Corpus Hermetica*, the deeply-felt theological work, resurrected from the shimmering shadows of remote antiquity, that provided the most

significant, most profound influence on Renaissance alchemy and the century afterwards. Isaac Newton practiced alchemy in his own private laboratory for three decades and died in 1727, an astounding 174 years after Ficino first translated Thrice-Great Hermes. Newton's comments on the Emerald Tablet, confidently attributed to Trismegistus, are not without interest, and we shall later note them.

Ficino opened the floodgates for many gifted, if at times eccentric, writers who chose to compose their minor masterworks on alchemy. The poetry we are so familiar with—Donne, Shakespeare, Spenser—uses much of their imagery, often lifted from the page. These alchemical figures are minor writers, though often quite exceptional with special gifts for glorious imagery—a student of Blake should not be without them—and our story of Ficino's ever-ranging influence is not complete without them. Unfortunately they appear in books now out of print, but hopefully this volume can start to turn that around.

Return to our many Renaissance alchemists and their successors—what were they after? In simplest terms, they hoped to create within their laboratory, above ground, the transmutation of metals below ground, only the laboratory would do so at comparatively lightning speed. If Saturn required a millennium to transmute lead to gold, a competent or gifted alchemist could accomplish the same in one to three years. This surely is lightning speed. Norton does not mention these possible examples of comparative numbers, because they had long been decided on before he started to write.

Learning to perform the alchemical task correctly or successfully would require precise, detailed instructions. Norton does not doubt those instructions exist—he would have no reason in composing the *Ordinal* if he did not think that—but a student

cannot learn alchemy from a book. Norton shakes a warning finger at his reader, who presumably had hoped to get some precise instructions from his author. Norton will provide a lot of laboratory information, especially the wonderful change of bright vivid colors in the glass furnace (called an alembic) as the alchemical process and move forward.

It is almost a gigantic tease, which is true of so much subsequent alchemical writing. All the basic steps of the alchemical process are discussed and elaborated on: calcinations, rarefaction, distillation, repeating the process. This pseudo-knowledge could be gotten from a basic alchemical handbook or pamphlet, but these can be extremely difficult to follow and fathom because they insistently use the obscure, arcane, inconsistent symbols of alchemy. The earnest reader will do far better with the *Ordinal*, for Norton deliberately, and admiringly, avoids all obscurities of language. If he uses a metaphor, a bright school child could understand it. If he uses a technical term, he makes certain his reader understands it clearly.

These two factors go a long way towards explaining the lasting popularity of *The Ordinal*. Norton prides himself on plain, clear words, and he achieves this without losing the stable masculine rhymes and firm metrical sense that truly make his work poetry. Any Chaucerian should read it. If Chaucer had lived, he would have read with satisfaction and pleasure.

But not enlightenment—no not that. Chaucer, like all early Renaissance readers, could memorize each of the 1,500 couplets of the *Ordinal*—the poetry is not quite that good—and still not know how to conduct himself successfully in an alchemical lab. How hot should the fire be in the bottom of the glass of the alembic? How thick the glass? Better to burn fresh kindling or charcoal? Or both? How to know? Norton goes not say. He cautiously puts the bait

before his reader and silently pulls it back, so the reader is not quite sure how little he is learning. How much kindling to burn iron? Proper to add quicksilver? How much does quicksilver add to the heat of copper? The height of flames? Surely these are essential questions. Ignorance could cause the alembic to shatter, sending scalding glass every place, including the ignorant beginner's astonished face.

Secrecy on essentials, Norton tells us, is both appropriate and proper to alchemy. The *Ordinal* is meant only to whet the reader's appetite, not to provide full instruction. What then? In the traditions of Zen and Buddhism, of which Norton likely knew nothing, the student must seek a master, a guru, for specialized one-on-one instruction in the subject he wishes to master. This method, Norton repeatedly insists, is the only path a student can take towards fully achieving his art. In time, after many successful attempts, the student himself, now called an adept, can become a master, and lead another young man along the path he himself had once taken. The baton has been passed, and it shall continue to be passed throughout the centuries, or for the amount of time a pebble of underground copper can turn to silver.

The master must teach far more than precise laboratory techniques, essential as those are, because alchemy is above all a spiritual practice. This might sound a contradiction to all that has gone before—attaining gold a spiritual practice? How so? Norton never knew Zen but his spiritual ideas are similar. The alchemical student must develop a deep interior purity, totally free of selfishness and greed. This is the required koan: the student can only obtain silver and gold by having no desire for them. He can have set up his alembic properly, with just the right amount of kindling on the copper, but if his heart is set on gold rather than prayers to the Lord, then the brightest physical flames will leave

the copper unchanged. What must occur are two simultaneous transformations. The student must undergo a profound spiritual transformation, shedding all physical desires, for chunks of gold and the pretty woman across the street, and concentrating solely on a selfless union with his creator. With this deep spiritual change, the copper now has a chance to turning to gold. But the student, now truly an adept, has succeeded either way. Sure, gold is nice, but his deep mystical experience is far more valuable. Gold is not likely to save his soul, but the latter will. Somehow the mystic adept's busy hands keep all aspects of the alembic working properly. Nothing can be left to chance, not with the divine insights he is having. The endurance of alchemy is ensured, in ways a skeptical modern can seldom understand.

Norton tells two amusing anecdotes of dishonest alchemists who got their comeuppance, and one is reminded of Chaucer's "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," about a rogue alchemist who manages to defraud many people. Norton makes brief mention of several great alchemists of the past—Avicenna, Roger Bacon, Albertus Magus—and urges his readers to study these masters, for significant pieces of knowledge can be gained from each. Put all these pieces together and the potential student will be headed toward the right path. All he needs is a personal master. Then he can write his own books which no one will ever fully understand. Then he can write his own poems, showing a virtuous display of alchemy's difficult, complex imagery—like with today's modernist poetry, if these works can be understood, something obviously must be wrong. We shall see. Our next chapters take us to these followers of Norton, who mentions Thrice-Great Hermes five times, lines 1937, 2271, 2660, 2633, 2635. With such substantial evidence of Trismegistus, we can be sure Ficino is forever lurking nearby.

Chapter Twenty-nine:

Jacob Boehme, the Shoemaker Turned Mystic

Jacob Boehme was born in 1575, though this date is an approximation. His birthplace is Gorlitz, a tiny town in upper Lusatia. He was a shoemaker, apparently a very good one. Whenever he settled down to make shoes, he could always find work. We can assume this skilled craft required him to spend considerable time repairing shoes. With wife and children, he did need to make a living, an unpleasant fact not always in the front of his mind—for Boehme was a mystic, who had an inner experience of transcendent illumination in 1610, which would forever change his life.

Boehme was careful never to assert that his brief contact with the divine contained a vision of a burning bush or a chariot of fire. All was within, deeply within and later fire would be his frequent image of the mystic's ever approaching closeness to God. He did not need to see fire to deeply feel it.

After his profound illumination in 1610, Boehme felt a special calling from God. He was definitely meant to do more in this life than make shoes. He began to write, at first only for his private use, as a way of keeping control of his deep mystical

longings and his newfound readings of scripture, especially the Book of Revelations. For a few years, he was a quiet rebel. He believed the all-powerful Lutheran church had become, in many places, as cruel and tyrannical as the Catholic monstrosity it meant to replace.

Boehme wrote vigorously to oppose both sides. Each person requires a clear, direct path to the divine beauty of God's love and mercy. And no organized church should dare stand in the way of that path. Boehme was a rebel whose voice was rising. He emphasized each person's capacity for a direct mystical experience. He stands firm and tall in that long line of Gnostics, Cathars, Anabaptists, and later Quakers. Boehme's writings started to pass around in manuscript in his local community. His readership needed to remain secret, but was deeply impressed with what the mystic shoemaker had to say. Boehme's writings reached an ever widening audience, with more and more copies made of each tract.

Meanwhile Boehme kept writing, always writing, ever writing. He approached Christian truth from as many angles as he could think of, but usually with a strong mystical bent. He quietly believed at times a divine light shone inside him, though never nearly as powerful as his experience in 1610. More and more copyists worked on his manuscripts. In time Boehme's works reached the printing press, so his audience could be vastly expanded. A Christian mystic was bound to suffer persecution in this age, but Boehme's worse problems were ceaseless battles with censors and critics in high places, though he once did serve a week in jail.

Why was he so fortunate, or why was his fate so different than Giordano Bruno's? Boehme was so intensely Christian, so steeped in scripture, with a profound love of Christ pouring out of

almost every page, that he would have been most difficult to prosecute. Perhaps the authorities realized this and decided not to give it a try. Also, Boehme might never have stayed in one place long enough for the authorities to be exactly sure what he was saying. He did not travel widely, limiting himself to the German states, Swiss canons, and the low countries, but he traveled often. He had a special gift for friendship, and would gladly bear the arduous burdens of travel to be with a close companion who shared his spiritual beliefs.

Boehme would have caused Ficino not only to roll over in his grave but to sit up and take notice. Ficino worried his emphasis on Plato and Neo-Platonism with the highest truths of divinity and nature, with occasional quotes from scripture but always in a far subordinate role, might someday get him into trouble with the inquisition. Today's reader of Ficino cannot help but feel the great Florentine was very fortunate. But Ficino did always maintain a meek subordination to church authorities and these authorities no doubt liked the rich coins the Medici's kept dropping into their tills. For the inquisition to attack Ficino would be a grave insult to the Medici's, and we must recall that Ficino did live to see a Medici sit on Peter's chair.

Boehme surely had none of these advantages. He had to know Ficino's reputation, and he might have mulled all this over while spending his week in jail. Boehme relied on numerous small patrons, loyal and devoted to his copious writing. He could not have succeeded without them.

He was obviously not making many shoes. He shows no special knowledge of Plato, and his main, overwhelming influence will always be scripture, especially Revelations. Boehme often commented on how the end of time was close at hand, and the devil was a ferociously powerful force, who could only be escaped

by deep heartfelt prayer. Ficino frequently talked about contemplation—his favorite word—but his source was Diotima, not John the Divine.

Yet Boehme held several pervasive, dominant influences from the Florentine, which is why Ficino would have rattled about his coffin to take notice. Boehme found alchemy a powerful metaphor for his theological explications. He might never have set foot in a laboratory, but he had read through considerable alchemical literature. Most alchemical tracts emphasize the adept must have purity of heart, sanctity of intention, for any possibility of success in his glass alembic. A greedy alchemist is guaranteed of achieving nothing. Boehme adapted this value system to his mystical writing, and these extended passages would be inexplicable to a modern reader unversed in alchemy. The same statement can be made about Boehme's use of Kabbalah—this of course is a Christian Kabbalah which had its start with Pico della Mirandola at Florence. Boehme also uses a sacred numerology, thereby linking Christ with Pythagoras, just like he had connected Christ with Thrice-Great Hermes when using alchemy.

Hence Ficino had found a kindred spirit who found Christ more interesting than Plato—and what exactly did that mean? How could Revelations, with its confused mishmash of bizarre symbols, hold more cosmic truth than Plato's *Timaeus*? The middle ages had access to only one work of Plato, the *Timaeus*, and they did quite nicely by it. If a thinking man in medieval times worried incessantly about the Last Judgement, he could read *Timaeus* and find deep comfort. Nothing about the end of things there. Plato was an optimist. The early Renaissance needed optimists.

True, the *Timaeus* talked of the lost continent of Atlantis, and thereby introduced this tragic tale to western culture, but Atlantis was but one island kingdom, though a very large one.

What Boehme predicted was the impending destruction of everything, and he did so using Florentine value systems. Was the Egyptian apocalypse in the *Corpus Hermetica* too much for him? Too influential? Much too believable? Of course Boehme's answer to these questions would be an adamant no. What he found all too believable was Revelations, and this might ultimately separate him from Ficino. Ficino liked watching the sunflower lift its head when the dawn sun shone on it—the whore of Babylon was never part of his vocabulary.

Yet Boehme found one method or technique of the Neo-Platonists to be irresistible: an unflinching belief in a cosmos, divine and mundane, built on hierarchies. This is a major theme of most thinkers in this volume, and surely Shakespeare and Marlowe found frequent places for hierarchy in their poetry. Boehme was not a specific influence on our two playwrights, but his influence was dominant on major poets in our two subsequent volumes, notably Milton, Blake, Coleridge, and Goethe. These four artists might have been different without their long study of Boehme, and so we especially feel the need to include him in this first volume. Boehme influenced one other later writer, the philosopher Hegel. At the close of his major work, *The History of Philosophy*, Hegel encloses a section praising Boehme, especially his prose style, which Hegel calls “natural speech.” Boehme might sound like natural speech to Hegel, but very few others.

Boehme is the Neo-Platonist, obsessed with hierarchies, who writes a dense, compressed prose, in German—he avoided the scholar’s language of Latin, of which he knew little, for his native German—and his style closely resembles the thick forest of trees that is the philosophical prose of German thinkers, most notably Hegel, but also Kant, Fichte, Schlegel, even Marx when he writes of religious matters. Boehme’s admirers might be shocked to hear

him compared to Marx, but we are talking about the slow, often impenetrable forest of his German prose, not his content. No one in Boehme's era wrote German prose like he did, nor would a thinker compose such long, complex, interweaving German sentences until Kant, and that would be 175 years later.

This might seem an exaggeration. But to prove the contrary, read extended passages of Boehme compared with any other writers in this study. He is more challenging not by his ideas but by his syntax. He is a *sui generis*, a Florentine with Hegel's sentence structure. A Boehme had never happened before and he would never happen again. This might largely explain the steadfast devotion of his followers, never a widespread group but always present. His significance must be that he influenced literary giants of a later age. It is impossible he could have had an impact on a daringly original alchemist working his way towards genuine chemistry. His collected writings form one continuous stream, including formal tracts and letters to close friends. He never strays far from his main theses: the human person must be reborn with Christ living within, and this alone can offer assured protection from the endless wiles of Satan. He is not a dualist, but he does provide Satan with considerable powers. This born-again experience must happen soon, for the Last Judgement is near, with all its tremendous joys and horrors—it all depends what side of the fence you come down on.

This is a simple message. The Gospel of Matthew tells the same message in clear, plainspoken words. What makes Boehme so troubling is he uses his profound Florentine influences to lure his reader away from his essential scriptural message. Take his use of hierarchies. No Renaissance writer ever came up with so many hierarchies. Of course Boehme finds that seven planets and the corresponding seven metals form a hierarchy, but in our era that

requires the originality of noting the sun rises each morning. Boehme makes large, elaborate charts for his various hierarchies. Let us look closely at how one chart works. Nature holds a hierarchy of seven properties, starting with harshness, followed by attraction, then bitterness, fire, light, sound, figure. Obviously these are arbitrary terms, not found in scripture or any previous writer, but Boehme finds them solid definitions of what takes place in the cosmos. These seven terms are descriptions of process, and show a conflict of forces required for progress in cosmic movement.

Boehme thrived on conflict, with many passages depicting the battle of light and darkness for the person's soul. Neither can exist without the other, one must always be inside the other—the Chinese yin and yang comes to mind, which Boehme could not possibly have heard of in the little German-speaking towns he frequented—and this structure provides the eternal conflict. This is not so hard to explain, because Boehme puts on the brakes with his dualistic contrast. His seven natural properties is an altogether different story. These seven must fuse with the divine trinity of Father, Son, Holy Spirit. So far, not too much trouble.

Boehme is a devout Trinitarian. Scholars who believe Boehme somehow influenced Isaac Newton overlook this. Newton, in the secrecy of his private writings, was adamantly opposed to the Trinity. Newton also filled nearly a million pages with private notes, and yet no mention of Boehme. So we can safely move on from this scholarly pitfall. Boehme believed in a divinely infused universe, but Newton made no note of this in understanding gravity.

It is Boehme's hierarchical chart for his seven natural principles that can leave the viewer speechless. Each of the seven principles form a horizontal row across the top, and beneath each

principle are fifteen to seventeen qualities, though in one instance the vertical number is only four, when listing Galen's four humours. What we have, *in toto*, are seven principles represented by 115 qualities, with the qualities being just as arbitrary as the principles. Placing various geometric figures onto this massive chart would perhaps find added meanings, though Boehme does not suggest that.

In a truly occult cosmos—if this is truly what Boehme is about—all these 115 qualities would be interconnected and could thereby be drawn on for special powers. That would make Boehme a deliberately obtuse magus, and yet I do not think this is the case. Rather than a magus, we have a shoemaker with a distinct fondness for large complicated charts, rather as an end in themselves. Recall he made many grandiose charts, not just the one under discussion. Even a mystic would require a hobby.

This disparaging tone results from looking closely at Boehme's chart on seven natural principles and failing to find any significant meaning. Consider the qualities in one horizontal line, the bottom one: worms, venomous wormes, evill beasts, good beasts, flying beasts, tame beasts, fifth. How does the fifth fit into all of this? A musical fifth? Not impossible. No explanation would be truly impossible, and therein lies the problem. Most likely Boehme meant the quintessence, the summation of Aristotle's four natural properties. But how to know? How to analyze if you cannot know? Does the flying beast exist in truth or myth? If you like these nagging questions, Boehme has several other charts to look into. Puzzles have their place. A puzzle with occult possibilities could be tantalizing for a would-be mystic with too much time on his hands.

Finally we must come to Boehme's prose, which requires quotation, to represent all we have been talking about. Boehme

was a follower of Paracelsus, who believed God's actions in opening Genesis were chemical separations of cosmic proportions. Boehme felt comfortable with that. Paracelsus, a rigorously practicing chemist, insisted nature could be divided into three parts: sulphur, mercury, and salt, with the liquid mercury the most vital. Boehme agreed on all counts, as shown in his many alchemical passages, where the adept seeks union with Christ in a repetitive process that requires more combinings and separations than any previous alchemist had considered—hence we have serious doubts Boehme ever worked in a lab.

In his tract, *Man and Nature*, Boehme has an extended alchemical passage that lasts five thousand words. Relax, dear reader, we are not going to quote the entire passage. This must be left Boehme scholars, and many do exist. William Blake read these five thousand words several times before composing his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Secondly, in the same anguish, in the austere desire, the hot fire is generated, which consumes the substance, which the coldness, viz. The impression of the desire to nature makes: Thus there remains in the fire the contention bewixt the cold and the heat; the cold will have its life according to its property, and in that strives for life, it enkindles the heat in its impression, and immediately the heat deprives the cold of its might, and consumes the cold substance, and then also the fire-spirit cannot subsist; for unless it has substance to go out, therefore it must continually, and without intermission, die in itself in the fiery anxious desire: So long as it has the cold's substance to live upon, its life arises, and yet it is nothing but a constant dying and consuming, and in its devouring is the greatest hunger after substance; the same

(hunger) passes forth through and with the devouring out of the drying of the fire, and dwells in the nothing, yet it may not be a nothing, and also it cannot be a nothing, yet it may not be a nothing, and also it cannot be a nothing, therefore it draws the fire again into itself; for its own desire is bent towards its mother. But seeing it is once dead to the fire-source, it cannot die any more in the fire of the heat or cold, but it continually proceeds forth from the fire, and the fire draws it again continually into itself, and so it is the life of the fire; and this is the air, which, in the fire is rightly called wind, by reason of the strength and force; and in that which is proceeded forth it is properly called air, by reason of its life of meekness.

Boehme spent the last fourteen years of his remarkable life writing in this vein. We could have quoted other passages from other works, but the rough, turbulent intensity of style endures. Boehme was always deeply serious about whatever words he set down on paper. There are no easy passages. English readers of Boehme, in his own lifetime, found a gifted translator in John Sparrow. Sparrow began his translations soon after the King James Bible was published in 1611, and neither has been surpassed.

One writing of Boehme makes frequent use of the term magic, with no charts, and we need mention that. In a 1620 letter to his friend Paul Kaym, Boehme used magic ten times with a consistent meaning that Ficino would strongly have approved. Magic is the great connecter between the inner man and his God. Magic is the mystical experience, or the constant effort to seek it. Magic is the Incarnation of Christ which man shall never cease trying to be a part of. To be born again is magic. To defeat Satan

for all eternity is magic. It is no wonder that Coleridge and Blake were not hesitant to use this term. Magic is the divinity in all people, from the one Source of all divinity, to the farthest stretches of all time.

Chapter Thirty:

John Dee, the Magus of Queen Elizabeth

John Dee was the most famous English magus of the long Elizabethan era. Dee was born in 1527, and so he was thirty-one when Elizabeth with bold confident strides climbed onto the throne in 1558. But she wanted to take no chances, and desired an astrologer to tell her the most hopeful date on the calendar for her coronation. She could never forget she was the daughter of King Henry VIII and Ann Boleyn, and that her mother had been beheaded by orders of her father. The world she grew up in was far from secure, and the astrologer she chose for her coronation was John Dee.

Dee would often be known as the queen's conjurer. She would visit him at his private home called Mortlake, located in a westerly direction eight miles up the Thames from London. The queen recognized Mortlake contained the finest, most comprehensive library in western Europe. She noted her acclaimed navigators sought Dee's cartographical advice before setting out on distant voyages on uncharted waters. When Dee wrote a peaceful document urging Britain to build a great navy, the queen read his words very carefully. She would die in 1603, and thereby not live

to recognize the wise prophecy of Dee's suggestions. Dee was the finest English mathematician of his time, though he almost always combined this skill with the occult arts. He felt both astrology and alchemy were serious spiritual systems which require careful measurement.

Elizabeth rewarded her personal magus with high praise and the great honor of her personal visits. Once the queen arrived unexpected at Dee's Mortlake home only hours after Dee's mother had died, and yet Dee still stood outside his home and thanked Elizabeth for this honor. Strangely this pattern repeated itself. Hours after Dee watched his beloved second wife take her final breath, the queen was again knocking at his Mortlake door for a surprise visit.

But Elizabeth was guilty of far worse than poor timing. Her high-flown praises of Dee would not put bread on his table, nor allow him adequate time for his many research projects. His great library, put together at his own expense, was kept open to visiting scholars, and yet the queen overlooked the need to assist him financially. There is no nice way to say it: Elizabeth was a tight skinflint when dealing with Dee, and consequently this rare combination of scientist and magus was always kept scrounging for his next few coins. Scholars frequently make the point that Dee is peculiarly difficult to understand because of his varied and manifold interests. This is undoubtedly true, as this study shall show, and yet a strong partial explanation must be Dee's constant fear, for the last four decades of his life, of the wolf at his door. If his strange occult pursuits have a desperate air about them, this should not be surprising in a highly educated man who lived in chronic financial desperation. Dee married three times, and always had several small mouths to feed. His constant hope that the queen would eventually grant him financial stability is tinged with a deep

sadness. He shows the unknowing optimism of a child, for most men would have given up after the first decade of special pleading.

John Dee must always be mentioned in a study of Shakespeare, whose final play *The Tempest* has a magician named Prospero for the main character. A wide and wild array of events take place in *The Tempest*, and all are brought about by Prospero's magic. The play closes with Prospero making a formal retirement from magic, just like Shakespeare was leaving the theatre. Many commentators believe Shakespeare based Prospero, to some extent, on John Dee. This is not a huge jump of the imagination. It would be difficult for an Elizabethan to think of a magus without John Dee coming to mind. In spite of all of his financial problems, Dee had managed to remain a public figure for close to half a century. No other Renaissance magus can make that claim. If he was curiously inconsistent, that made him all the more interesting.

Dee lived from 1527 to 1608, and his long life can be divided into categories: 1.) his writings, studies, lectures, occult performances, and, 2.) his close relationship of six years with Edward Kelley, a skryer, who looked into crystal balls and encountered various spirits and angels who talked at great length to him. Kelley reported all these visions to Dee, who made copious, detailed notes. If people know one thing about Dee, it is usually the bizarre, unbelievable nature of these angel communications. Hence this will be the first of the two categories we cover.

Kelley did meet with spirits, but mostly he conversed with angels. Dee never saw nor heard anything except what Kelley told him—for six years. Historians can even provide the inclusive dates when Kelley gave his performances for Dee: September 21, 1583 to December 2, 1589. While Elizabeth's court showed little interest in these goings-on, Dee and Kelley were able to perform their wonders in the royal courts of Bohemia and Poland. Perhaps they

were an early variation of a vaudeville act, but that seems unlikely. Magic was taken seriously in the courts where the twosome appeared, and if Kelley was convincing, the court would be convinced. Kelley must have been very convincing. The courts believed. Dee, a highly educated man, believed. Dee often had serious doubts about Edward Kelley's personal character, but none about the truth and Christian virtue of his visions. Kelley only talked with Christian angels, and so Dee was assured his soul was not in jeopardy. Dee knew Kelley had once been a con artist. The top of Kelley's ears were clipped, the rather grotesque punishment for counterfeiting coins of Elizabeth's realm. Kelley always wore a hood, but in his era that could not have been fooling many people.

Yet the strong evidence exists that he fooled nearly everybody, including John Dee, especially John Dee. How could this happen? No record exists in the Renaissance of another skryer who can even compare to Kelley. Did Kelley actually believe what he reported he was seeing and hearing? To discount this possibility leaves only one other explanation: Kelley was a knowing fraud, and yet a performer of extraordinary gifts, far in excess of the finest actor, for he was often on stage with no script—of course no script—and so he had to make up his lines as he went along. To do this successfully for six years shows a fraud of unique, versatile talents. Hard as this might be to accept, it is the only conclusion left to us, unless we want to believe Kelley actually talked to Gabriel and Raphael, which in an occult age or any age is preposterous.

After Dee and Kelley had been together for five years, Kelley's angel proposed the horrifying, explosive idea: the two men were to trade their wives for a single night of lovemaking. After much painful procrastination, Dee went along, and his marriage required several years and Kelley's permanent absence to

repair itself. The wife-swapping suggestion is of course outrageous. Kelley had more gall than a hundred con artists, and he'd long been attracted to Dee's wife and despised his own. But Dee sadly trusted the wicked idea came from a virtuous Christian angel and therefore from almighty God. He had been duped that badly. If Kelley told him to leap from a tall building because he would surely sprout powerful wings, Dee surely would have done so, probably taking his poor wife with him.

A curious result of minor literary significance did result from the Dee-Kelley relationship. Dee's copious notebooks carefully transcribed whatever Kelley's angels were saying. Most often this is a confusing mish-mash, and we admire the dedicated Dee scholars who feel the need to work their way through it. Snippets of dialogue between Dee and Kelley can be equally baffling, serving as guideposts into more confusion. But occasionally, a glowing, poetic passage of beautiful mystical prose results from an angel's speech. The angel is usually Uriel, a Kelley creation. A short book with only these passages would be well worth reading, though the editorial exercise would be considerable. Uriel reveals a simplicity and purity of language found no where else in Dee's canon, including his many works apart from Kelley, where Dee's sentences often resemble a lengthy snake twisted into elaborate knots that can never quite get untangled.

A brief quote from a long speech from Uriel will be useful. Dee dated this angelic speech on August 6, 1585, location Prague.

The Spirit is everlasting, and the oil of comfort. The
Heavens gather themselves together, with
Hallelujah to bear witness of thy great indignation
and fury prepared for the Earth, which hath risen up
with the Kings of the Earth, and hath put on the

Wedding Garments: saying with herself, I am a Queen, I am the daughter of felicity.

The actual quote is ten times longer and manages apocalyptic content with fresh imagery. Mystical writers have their place in literature. Could Dee have written this well without Kelley? If so, how tragic his life becomes, in so very many directions. He was a young man of great versatile gifts and promise—and then he met Kelley. Dee could have done so much more, perhaps so much better.

Dee entered St. John's College, Cambridge in 1542, when he was fifteen and stayed three years. He was passionately interested in all branches of knowledge. He sought ultimate truths, the unwinding of paths of knowledge that could lead no farther. He set for himself a strict daily regimen that required eighteen hours of intense study—he would not have been John Dee if he was not intense—with only fours set aside for sleep. He only required two hours for meals, friendship, exercise, laundry. No record exists of how closely he kept to this schedule. But we do know he had a widely inquiring mind, with special interests in geography, astrology, and mathematics, and no English university could meet those needs.

Dee wanted to learn more during his eighteen hours of daily study than Aristotle. Hence he traveled to Louvain, where he studied from 1548 to 1551. He became an expert on maps and the newest knowledge of geography, and a generation later, back in London, his advice would prove invaluable to England's brave navigators, set out to explore distant oceans for the crown. In 1550, Dee received his first serious taste of fame, when he gave a series of lectures on Euclid in Paris. His audience, highly excited and appreciative, had never before heard of Euclid nor the basics of geometry. Dee spoke before packed houses, with people glad to

have standing room if they could only hear these new wonders. Dee was the rare geometer to become a hero for his knowledge.

Twenty years later, back in England, the first edition of Euclid in an English translation was published, and Dee was chosen to write the preface, which would become one of his most admired works and provide him a minor place in the history of science. When Dame Frances Yates stresses her convincing thesis that the Renaissance magus did much by his hands-on approach to nature to launch the scientific revolution, she will mention Dee's 1570 preface to Euclid as a sterling example of how a magus can have both feet planted squarely in quantitative science.

Yates makes a solid point, but Dee is more interested in reaching blacksmiths and toolmakers than Galileo. Dee applauds Euclid's translation into the vernacular, so the common people can read and study him. The people who work with their hands have much to learn from Euclid, whose wisdom would have remained hidden as long as he remained only in Latin. Dee enters an Hermetic vein when he rhapsodizes on all the potential glories that can come from the wondrous, ever increasing flow of knowledge. Dee could never take things halfway. He becomes a prophet of great events to come, all through knowledge. A blacksmith might not be able to study eighteen hours a day, but he will get the idea.

Dee's major works are the *Propaedeumata Aphoristica*, published in 1558, and *The Monas Hieroglyphica*, published six years later. The unbending sadness of Dee's life is he would live an additional forty-four years and never write anything of equal importance or originality. The first mentioned work has a Latin title, not surprising since the entire work is written in Latin and contains 120 aphorisms or theorems. The *Propaedeumata* can be translated as opening or beginning. This is an early work, and yet

Dee's finest effort on cosmology, astrology, the divine rules that surround us. It is not a quick read but accessible.

The *Monas Hieroglyphica* is a strange work, even for Dee. The title is explanatory. Dee has created a single hieroglyph, a united coming together of several zodiacal signs to form one all-encompassing symbol that, if understood properly, can represent all creation. Dee uses several pages of theorems to explicate his hieroglyph. A reader needs a clear illustration of Dee's hieroglyph even to begin to understand. The hieroglyph looks deceptively simple, which might lead the reader to later difficulties. The *Monas Hieroglyphica* has never been popular, and yet devoted occultists have kept it in print for over five centuries. Today a small occult bookshop is more likely to have a copy than a scholarly library.

What makes Dee's hieroglyph perpetually interesting, to the educated few, is his bringing together Kabbalah, geometry, and zodiacal symbols. Surely this is original with Dee, totally original. Kabbalah takes words apart and puts them back together again, thereby attaining new and higher meanings. Dee does the same with his hieroglyph. By taking apart his hieroglyph in various ways, he can form all the signs of the zodiac, all the sevens for the seven planets, and thereby all the corresponding signs for the seven metals, and so all astrology and alchemy are brought together. One can understand why a dedicated occultist, with a bent toward geometry and the sacredness of certain shapes, would like all this, and truly feel he was attaining spiritual blessings during his many manipulations, with each manipulation a subject for profound meditation. This is high magic for Dee and his followers, and not at all a game. It is hard to imagine Dee playing a game at any time in his life.

The *Propaedeumata Aphorista* relies on words, those 120 aphorisms, to paint pictures. Nicholas Clulee, Professor at

Frostburg State University, published a 50-page article on this work titled, "Astrology, Magic, and Optics: Facets of John Dee's Early Natural Philosophy," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 30 (1977), pp. 637-80. Clulee acknowledges that Ficino and Hermeticism had a profound influence on Dee, though not this early in his career. Clulee stresses Dee's value system underwent considerable development before reaching Ficino, who inevitably influenced all Renaissance magical thinkers.

But when Dee wrote his aphorisms he was deeply under the influence of two medieval thinkers, Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon, and that influence was largely geometric. Dee particularly desired to remove all traces of evil dark magic from Bacon's reputation. Both Grosseteste and Bacon believed light was the principal factor in cosmic creation, and most significantly, light always traveled in a straight line. Hence light was geometric. Any ray of light—or any of the other numerous spiritual rays operating throughout the cosmos—starts from a single point and then progresses to a line. Lines become circles and squares, rectangles and parabolas. All these forms have the potential to turn into each other, but the basic laws of geometry cannot be violated. Yes, this overall structure does bear similarities to Dee's famous hieroglyph, yet without the endless complexity.

The human in *Aphoristas* can manipulate all these rays of light and other powers to enhance his life. Roger Bacon emphasized this is not wicked magic, strongly forbidden by the church, but working within the natural processes of God's creation, with the intent of slightly altering those processes or speeding them along. Alchemy is the best example of the latter effort; copper deep underground will eventually mature into gold, after long decades, perhaps centuries, while the alchemist in his lab can complete the

same task in a matter of days. Hence any follower of Bacon would be a strong advocate of alchemy, and Dee was just that.

Dee urged his contemporaries to learn more about the exact distances, sizes, and speeds of planets. Only by significantly improving these measurements could the full marvels of astrology be enjoyed. Dame Frances Yates, our favorite Renaissance scholar, would be quick to point out Dee's strong emphasis on quantification. Yet Dee made no measurements himself. He was no Tycho Brahe, much less a Galileo, though he surely put valid ideas in the air.

Dee again emphasized geometry to show how a star's light impacts on earth. A cone leads this light from star to earth, with the base of the cone wedged on the star's surface and the cone's opposite point on earth. The shortest length of the cone means the most powerful impact on earth, and yet Dee is not quite certain. He considers how a long thin cone might move the light or other rays more swiftly and therefore have a stronger impact. Dee can never be certain, or even approach certainty, because he never makes a measurement. He learns from Grosseteste and Roger Bacon, but does not advance beyond them. Dee also does not specify what the many other kinds of rays are, and what he does not know, he cannot measure.

Dee is similar to his important contemporary, Sir Francis Bacon. This Bacon called for many significant improvements in making needed scientific advance, and yet he left out mathematics. Bacon could not help associating math with various negative occult practices. The situation is tricky and not as common-sense simple as Dame Frances often makes it. Dee advocated math, staunchly praised it, but his only calculating was astrological, and that might be exactly what troubled Sir Francis. Yes, Dee was Prospero, a marvelous Prospero, and for this he shall always be

remembered. Dee and his friend Sir Philip Sidney agreed the five-beat poetic line had great magical possibilities. It is Prospero's voice, not Newton's. It is a magic that requires the heightened imagination to understand.

Chapter Thirty-one:

Giordano Bruno, Two Almost Forgotten Works

A book centered on Renaissance magic would have a cold sense of incompleteness without a serious look at Giordano Bruno. It was Frances A. Yates acclaimed book about Bruno, published in 1964 that thoroughly made the original claim that Bruno was a magus, fully steeped in a century of magical lore that started with Ficino. Yates' well-written expertise brought Renaissance magic into the mainstream of scholarly activity. She often mentioned how powerful this influence was on Shakespeare, among many other major writers, and she advised another scholar to follow up on this—forty-five years later, this book is now (2012) taking shape, gratefully under the inspiration of Dame Frances and her many writings.

Yates made the firm connection between Ficino and Bruno, with many figures passing the baton in-between. Ficino and Bruno write in strikingly different styles. Ficino can be nicely compared to the Neo-Platonists he so ably translated, while Bruno can write explosive parodies, rollicking comedies, overflows of manic language for the sheer joy of doing so. Both writers seek cosmic truth, but find very different ways of getting there. We shall

discuss two works by Bruno, a comic play, *The Candlebearer*, and a philosophical dialogue, *The Pegasus of Cabala*.

It would seem Bruno meant *The Candlebearer* to be a closet drama, read not performed, because of its extraordinary length. If it takes this author four hours to read, it might require twice that time for performance. Not even Wagner requires that much stamina of his audience. With Bruno, we have used the fine English translation by J. R. Hale.

Bonifacio is the Candlebearer, a profession never made exactly clear. He is forty-five, and married to a lovely woman, twenty years younger, named Carubina. Bonifacio should be quite happy with his good fortune, but he is not an easy man to satisfy. His major passion is for Vittoria, a courtesan, who does not share his desires. He believes in magic, often quite foolishly, and will rely on a fraudulent magus to win Vittoria. In the play's opening scene, Bonifacio declares his abiding faith in magic, using both prose and verse. The verse is very rare for this play. We quote both. The play has no pause between.

Bonifacio:

Art, Bonifacio, supplies the deficiency of nature. So it's my luck not to be able to make this traitress love me or even pretend to. Well, who knows, perhaps what my words, my love, my frenzy, can't move can be shifted by this occult philosophy. They say magic has such force that it can turn rivers in their courses back against nature, halt the tides, make the mountains bellow, the abyss cry out, can blot out the sun, veil the moon, pluck out the stars, turn day into night. As the academician sans academy wrote in that lost poem with the impossible title:

It stops the rapid rivers in their stride
And plucks the gilded stars down from the sky
Makes day of night, and turns night into day,
It makes the fixed moon to go awry.
Changing her features from the left to right,
It makes the sea swell and stay fixed on high,
Earth, air, fire, water it confounds together
And blows about man's purpose like a feather.

An alchemist, Cencio, makes a brief appearance with a long speech. We note this play is filled with many, many long speeches. It is common for a character to speak 500-700 words, then be followed by another character speaking the same. Bruno's wit and wisdom makes his characters excellent speakers—Bruno does not know how to be boring—but his characters must also be great listeners. Otherwise the play will not work, even in a closet reading. We quote the Cencio speech because it shows Bruno's satirical vein, reminiscent of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, which was written for the stage and plays well there. Cencio might be entertaining, but his speech starts a long conversation with Bernardo, the painter. As the reader digests all this information, there is so much more to come.

Cencio:

This business must be conducted in the light of the doctrines of Hermes Trismegistus and Geber. The core of all metals is mercury: lead belongs to Saturn, tin to Jupiter, iron to Mars, gold to the sun, bronze to Venus, silver to the moon. Quicksilver is especially mercurial, and there are traces of it in all other metals: that is why he is called the messenger of the gods; masculine among men, feminine among women. With reference to the metal mercury,

Trismegistus calls the sky “father” and the earth “mother” and says that the maternal gold is impregnated in the mountains, or in the valleys or in the plains, or in the sea or in abysses and caves; I’ve told you what this enigma signifies. In the womb of the earth this is the essential component of all metals; together with sulfur, according to most learned Avicenna, in his letter to Hazem. Against which opinion I cite Hermes, who claims the soul of any metal to consist of all the elements, and with Albertus Magnus I call the opinion of—according to the alchemists—Democritus ridiculous, which opines that lime and lye—he means aquafortis—are the base of all metals. Nor can I embrace the opinion of Gilgile, in his book *De Secreti*, where because he observed that “the base of metals is an infusion of ash” that “ash liquefies into glass and freezes with cold.”

A play with a halfway competent alchemist, Cencio, must also have a bungling, incompetent alchemist, also of course a miser. This is Bartolomeo, who avoids his lovely wife Marta to stand all night before his fiery furnace. His face is scalded, his appearance is ruined, but no matter. All that matters are those two precious metals, silver and gold, preferably gold. Like all Bruno’s characters, Bartolomeo can talk. Apparently when he is not standing before his furnace, he is talking. His soliloquy begins Act Three, and we quote the first half.

Bartolomeo:

The rot strike all those who are not of my way of thinking! Why don’t they set the precious metals above those senseless things? Metals like gold and

silver are the source of everything; these, these are the cause of words, plants, and stones; flax, wool, silk, fruit, corn, wine, oil, everything desirable on the earth depends on them. I give them this importance because without them, you can have none of the others. This is why gold is called the substance of the sun, and silver of the moon: take these two planets from the sky and what happens to your generative power, where is the light of the universe? Take gold and silver from the earth, how does life begin, grow, and flourish? How much better it would have been if the brute had declared that there was only one true essence instead of defining the other three and leaving this one—unless of course his intention was to protect my knowledge and possessions. Plants, words, and stories are quinessentials to crazed and feckless philosophers, hated by God, nature, and fortune, who drag out their lives without a penny piece in their pockets and die of starvation, all the time assuaging their envy by cursing gold and silver and those who possess them.

We return to the lovesick not-so-honest magus Scaramure. Not too brilliantly, Scaramure makes a wax figure of Vittoria, the much-desired Vittoria. The figure is made correctly, but Scaramure had requested that Bonifacio provide a hair from Vittoria. But Bonifacio is a slacker. He does not yet dare go near Vittorio, and so he substitutes a hair from his wife Carubina. This is one play where you cannot tell the players without a scorecard—it will get even more complicated.

The incorrect hair will allow Bruno's character to perform the "bed trick" which Shakespeare made famous in *Measure for Measure*. Carubina disguises as Vittoria, and so when Bonifacio believes he is sleeping with Vittoria, he is actually making love, in the deepest darkest night, with his wife.

The play has many more complications and complicated characters, and we stop here because we do not want this chapter to become an extended plot summary. But we have conveyed Bruno's zest for language, much language, and how his comic characters can hold a commanding presence, if perhaps overextended. What Bruno is telling us is his characters, so connected with magic and alchemy, cannot seek out rare cosmic truths until they first learn a few basic truths about themselves.

Our second Bruno work, *The Cabala of Pegasus*, shows his remarkable versatility. This short, brilliant philosophical dialogue would not seem to be written by the same author as *The Candlebearer*. Bruno's dialogue holds together many overlapping levels of satire and parody—a stylistic masterpiece that requires a firm grounding in Renaissance thought movements, all which have their origins in Ficino.

Bruno opens with two prose dedications, to a fictitious nobleman and to his reader. With these he begins the one joke—always to be taken seriously, but not too seriously—which he sustains throughout: divine or supernal wisdom can best be found in the ass. This might sound startling to the reader encountering it for the first time, but be assured this was Bruno's intention. Bruno was ever bold and meant to be shocking. There truly might not be any Renaissance modes of thought that he does not offend in this dialogue.

Bruno will compose three sonnets in praise of the ass. These are quite good poems, very funny, and obviously not poems

about more traditional worthy subjects. His sonnets do not praise a beloved, like Michelangelo or Sidney, but an ass, not the ass as symbol—never that—but a genuine ass. Bruno can make many puns on the word ass—he has a penchant for strange arcane puns—but always he comes right back to that four-legged creature with the big, floppy ears, the ass, the wonder of the universe. For this joke to work, he must find endless variations and never belabor one. Samson killed with the jawbone of an ass; the Hebrews were akin to an ass in Egyptian slavery; Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. The sonnets are guideposts. No one but Bruno could have written them. No one but Bruno would have considered the option.

In Bruno's letter to his reader, his praise for the ass slowly mounts till it reaches the impossible point of perfection: "Will the power of canonical authority forbid me from considering him a pillar of the church if he demonstrates a pious, devoted, and chaste manner to me? If I take him to be so lofty, blessed, and triumphant, will heaven and the whole world be able to stop me from calling him divine, Olympian, celestial? In conclusion (to no longer crack your head and mine), it seems to one that he is that world soul itself, all in all, and everything in every part." Not even Bruno could take his praise any higher. Plotinus—and the Ficino who translated him—would be shocked, always an operative Bruno word. Yet take the praise backwards in the other direction and what do we have—the by now all-too-familiar ass. If Neo-Platonists like hierarchies, Bruno is taking them on one, long rollicking ride.

The actual dialogues might almost seem anti-climactic, but Bruno the master is just getting started. He refers back to Nicholas of Cusa, called Cusanus, an early Quattrocento philosopher who strongly influenced both Ficino and Bruno with his theological

concept of learned ignorance. Cusanus was a German, an unusual nation to influence Italian thinkers, and he was not prolific. Rather he is known for that one idea: humans come closer to God by recognizing their ignorance of God. Hence what humans call goodness or justice are terms inapplicable to God, and discovering this within oneself is the learned ignorance that brings the person closer to God. Cusanus required fifty pages to explain this, in all its subtle ramifications, and he had few followers, though his admiring advocates were significant thinkers.

Bruno will play fast and loose with Cusanus, in spite of his respect. What in all creation is the best example of learned ignorance—the ass of course. The reader will know this is coming, but the enjoyment is how well Bruno does it. His speaker, Sebasto, uses sentences building a logical structure: “I have no problem with holding that whoever is ignorant, inasmuch as he is ignorant, is a fool; and whoever is a fool, is as much as he is foolish, is an ass; and therefore every ignorance is an asininity.”

Asininity is Bruno’s word, an original word with a highly original use. The lowest matches the greatest on high. The humble will be exalted, and none is more humble than the ass, none comprehends his ignorance with more clarity than the ass, and therefore no one in God’s overall scheme shall be more exalted than the ass. The ass represents the Jewish people, while the colt stands for the Gentiles. The parts all fit, neatly, securely. Bruno’s seamless, carefully crafted style makes this possible. He can be subtle when his style seems most exaggerated. If he did not understand Cusanus so thoroughly, he could not enjoy such playful sport with him.

The reader might suspect Bruno would be worn out by the second dialogue, but not so. His inventiveness reaches new heights with a new character, Onorio. Onorio is a human but he has had

several reincarnations, and Bruno provides them the richness of vocabulary to make them believable. Onorio had previously been an ass, the wisest creature. He had also once been Aristotle, the most foolish of men. Only Onorio can make this distinction because only he has lived both lives. Onorio should forget his past lives after his next death; meaning after his soul leaving his body, he must drink from the supernal waters of Lethe, bringing on new total forgetfulness. But Onorio, a wise ass, is a trickster. He approaches Lethe, bends over the powerful waters, and wets his lips, but he carefully does not swallow and therefore forgets nothing. Very clever. Aristotle is not shown doing this, so the ass has a big one up on the philosopher. The ass will rise to be winged, to fly like a spirit, like Pegasus. Aristotle does no such flying.

But the spiritual ass cannot stay flying for long. His next trips are downward through the transmigration process. But let Onorio tell it: "I was banished to being now a philosopher, now a poet, now a pedant, leaving behind my image in the heavens ... when it so happened that I had to return to some other terrestrial habitation." This new location is Macedon, home of the young Alexander, later to be called the Great, who was tutored by Aristotle, the human person in whom the ass has landed. Onorio does not mention proper names or species of any in-between transmigrations.

Bruno has developed an original, comic method to poke fun at Aristotle, his old nemesis. Bruno had been disagreeing with Aristotle since his early days with the Dominicans, who revered the old Greek. He was often a minority of one, the losing side. But now he can resourcefully, rather wickedly, get some of his own back, by letting Onorio speak as Aristotle: "Thence reporting the opinions of the ancients badly and foolishly, in such obscene manner that not even children and crazy old women would speak

and understand as I described those gallant men understanding and speaking.” Aristotle had never before taken it so hard on the chin, and it is hard to see how he could have escaped. Forming this question more accurately reveals more of Bruno’s humor: how exactly do you get out of the way of a flying, very intelligent, transmigrating donkey? Bruno set parameters no master thinker could get out of, and this is so much a part of the fun.

Bruno closes his miniature masterpiece with a debate between yet another intelligent ass and a foolish Pythagorean. As expected Pythagoras suffers the same fate by similar methods as Aristotle. The final speech is by Mercury, who of course sides with the ass. The one philosopher the ass did not go after was Giordano Bruno, who might well have been a match for him.

Chapter Thirty-two:

The Extraordinary Life of Tomasso Campanella

Tommaso Campanella was born in 1568 in the Calabria section of Italy, home to Pythagoras, Timaeus, and Abbot Joachim of Fiore. Campanella took very seriously his connection to these hallowed figures. Abbot Joachim was a medieval prophet who divided history into clearly defined periods based on scripture; his following was wide and lasted for several centuries, admired by Ficino and enduring through the Renaissance. Above all, Campanella considered himself a prophet, standing in the great tradition of Isiaiah and Joachim. He would compare Abbot Joachim to himself many times in his copious writings. His method was to bring together his own special gifts with biblical prophecy and predictive astrology. He is not an easy author to read. Few authors have ever taken themselves more seriously.

Campanella died in France in 1637. He lived out his long life with seven large, clearly distinguished, individual bumps on his head. He did not wear hats. He was proud of these seven bumps and believed they held profound magical value. The number seven coincided with the number of planetary bodies, the source of all astrology, a lifelong interest of Campanella, and the number of

metals growing in the earth, the source of all alchemy. Campanella was not a practicing alchemist, but his two larger bumps represented the two precious metals, gold and silver. He was not an ordinary man. Even without the bumps, he would surely have devoted his life to prophecy and magic. But if he needed extra convincing he was one of the few chosen, the bumps were always there. He might have worried slightly that someday they would go away.

Only a year after Giordano Bruno died at the stake in Rome in 1600, Campanella was facing a similar fate in a cell in the Castel Nuovo in Naples from June 4-5, 1601. For our description of what happened, we rely on the excellent biography by John M. Headley titled, *Tommaso Campanella and the Transformation of the World*, Princeton University Press, 1997. We will often refer to Professor Headley for assistance in our chapter on Campanella. He quotes four important sonnets by Campanella and makes important connections between his subject and Ficino. He has provided the definitive study of Campanella.

Return to Campanella's plight in June 1601. He faces execution and can only save himself by successfully faking insanity, not an easy act to pull off because the torturers were long trained to suspect it. By law, the inquisition could not execute a truly insane man. Hence Campanella must fake madness while undergoing the most severe, prolonged torture. If he pleads for mercy, the torture will stop, but then he is obviously sane and will be executed. The cruel reasoning is only an insane man would not plead for mercy.

This is what Campanella was up against. The torture machine was *la veglia* or awakener. The victim's body is suspended by arms and shoulders only a short distance over pointed spikes directed at his thighs and buttocks. The victim

needs exhaustive strength to keep his vulnerable body sections away from the spikes. When this strength fails, as it inevitably must, the spikes tear brutally into the skin. The victim howls and struggles to lift himself back up again. But he can only stay up so long and then he will go crashing back down again. As soon as he asks for mercy, he is declared sane and promptly executed. As long as he acts the part of the raving lunatic, almost oblivious to pain, the awakener continues to do its damage and the victim is till considered insane.

Professor Headley tells us Campanella kept up his lunacy performance for forty consecutive hours. He was near death, but willing to continue his performance. Forty hours were enough for the torturers, who perhaps were tiring. Campanella was cut down. He would next spend twenty-seven years confined to dungeons, where he produced a tremendous amount of writing.

Most of this writing would go unpublished till he left both the dungeons and Italy, and migrated to France, where he was treated with high honors at the court of King Louis XVIII. Campanella would even compose a long, complex astrological prediction for the king's newborn son. The lives of few men have undergone such changes.

Obviously Campanella could not keep up his insanity act for twenty-seven years. He possessed remarkable physical and emotional strength, but not even he could have done that. He maintained a correspondence with notable figures, including Galileo. Campanella was deeply impressed with Galileo and wrote glowing letters of praise. These letters were found among Galileo's papers, so we can assume he read them, but no evidence exists that he wrote back. This does not seem to have discouraged Campanella. Reasons? Other people did write to him, and it might be hard to discourage a prolific, prophetic writer in a dungeon.

A curious question is where Campanella got all his writing materials, plus candles. Since he was not reading by the light of the sun, he must have used thousands of candles—in twenty-seven years, tens of thousands.

Professor Headley concludes his book's Prologue with a useful quotation from Campanella. Headley finds the quote shows his subjects "transcendent confidence," which is surely true, but Campanella's words also provide a paraphrase of the Hermetic imagination. Campanella was a close follower of Ficino, who translated a famous brief passage from Thrice-Great Hermes which depicts how the human imagination can travel anywhere in the cosmos. This passage is quoted in our chapter on Ficino's Hermetic translation. But place Thrice-Great Hermes and Campanella side by side and the similarities are striking. Hear Campanella:

Man lives in a double world: according to the mind he is contained by no physical space and by no walls, but at the same time he is in heaven and on earth, in Italy, in France, in America, wherever the mind's thrust penetrates and extends by understanding, seeking, mastering. But indeed according to the body he exists not, except in only so much space as is at least required, held fast in prison and in chains to the extent that he is not able to be or to go to the place attained by his intellect and will, nor to occupy more space than defined by the shape of his body; while with the mind he occupies a thousand worlds.

A dungeon cell is certainly an adequate place to test the Hermetic imagination. Headley notes Campanella's first literary efforts as a prisoner were poetry, especially sonnets. Headley

believes the rigid structure of verse provided order to the writer whose life underground often threatened to disintegrate into a lack of all order. In his biography, pages 64 to 69, Headley provides a detailed study of Campanella's ideas on poetry. We cannot do better than quote extensively from Headley.

In considering Campanella the poet, one must take up in the very same breath Campanella the astrologer and the magician, for the latter are not simply associated with his poetic endeavor but most integral to it.

This is Headley's opening sentence about Campanella and verse. He continues, "Indeed astrology and magic are the necessary coefficients of a pansensist/panpsychic, Neo-Platonic view of the world." This is complex writing, with a major source the astrological writings of Ficino, especially *De Vita*. This will become clear as we move to the second paragraph in Headley's verse section.

For Campanella words are not flat names, pale substitutes for the thoughts they represent, exercised to tickle the reason; rather they are analogues of the divinized cosmos, communicable by an informing spiritus—evocative, charmed, incantational, productive. Thus poeticizing for him involves a sort of gnosis and requires a transcendental gift on the part of the poet, rendering him an instrument of supernatural inspiration. In his emerging understanding of poetry, Campanella breaks significantly with the current Aristotelian rules by which poetry had become entangled in pretty techniques of imitation. Building upon the proclivities of Telesio, Bruno, and Patrizi,

Campanella conceived of poetry as a divine gift having moral/political force as its immediate import and proper focus.

Campanella's influences are many, and what follows is not a laundry list, as Headley's further commentary will show; Campanella's complexity always requires clarification. Columbus is not only a part of the list, but a name repeatedly appearing in Campanella's writings. Campanella believed he lived in a grand new age leading to a millennium, and this required seemingly miraculous discoveries. Campanella, the prophet, finds Columbus the ultimate discoverer, the proof of his predictions. He belongs firmly on Headley's list, as do all the others.

While part of his (Campanella's) gnosis involves the Christian revelation, there are other revelations—the ontologies of the Neo-Platonists, the astrological/magical scales of Hermes Trismegistus, the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore, St. Bridget, and Catherine of Siena—all to be turned to the celebration not of classical mythology, Greek fables, but to contemporary heroes—Columbus, Magellan, Cortes, Galileo. This force, this sense of wondrous achievement, this perception of grandeur and of the universal, this true *terribilita* leads to a recovery of the Dantesque and a fresh perspective upon the totality of things.

These first two sources, the Neo-Platonists and Hermes Trismegistus, were translated by Ficino. Apparently the dungeon guards did not mind their inmate with all the head bumps reading Ficino. He could no longer have been considered insane, though far too dangerous to be released. He might always have felt that “awakener” looking over his shoulder. Yet he was an inmate of

extraordinary productivity. Courage? Of course. But the question also arises: what else was he to do? He had a brilliant, if eccentric mind. Twenty-seven years of blankly staring at dark, damp walls would not have sufficed.

Headley's third paragraph, a short one, provides the content to connect Campanella's verse with Ficino's *De Vita*.

In his *Del senso delle cose della magia*—initially composed in the first Neapolitan period, then confiscated at Bologna, to be recomposed in Italian during the commencement of his study in the dungeon of San Elmo, beginning July 1604—our prisoner explains that words and sounds as signs and motions possess magic force, both wonderful and certain, having the effect of impressing motion upon us and arousing sensations in us. For the air itself is a sentient medium upon which we impress words hortatory, evangelical, amatory, thus moving the spirit.

Ficino emphasizes in *De Vita* how music holds higher magical powers than other arts, because the sounds of music with words move directly through the air—with no interference whatsoever—into the human air inside the brain, where direct contact is made immediately with the human spirit. Ficino finds this process to be the most wondrous magic, which cannot be accomplished by fresco paintings or silent reading.

It is essential that Campanella is not talking about silent reading. For Campanella, poetry must be read or recited out loud. Poetry is, above all, an oral art. Hence poetry conveys the same airbound magical powers as Ficino's music. The comparison is exact, or as exact as comparisons of two maguses can be. These two men are philosophical magicians entering areas of high art, not

rigid mathematicians. Comparisons in magic are useful, important, often essential, but the scholar treads on precarious ground.

We next look carefully at four sonnets by Campanella, as provided in the Headley volume. The translations from Italian to English are expertly made by John Addlington Symonds in 1878. Symonds is not a name to forget. He also translated the sonnets of Michel Angelo Buonarroti, and wrote several excellent books on Renaissance cultural history. He has a gifted prose style, and provides a rare expertise on the Latin verse composed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. His work is available in paperback. We present our first Symonds' translation.

Number 166

As to the centre all things that have weight
Sink from the surfaces as the silly mouse
Runs at a venture, rash though timorous,
Into the monster's jaws to meet her fate:

Thus all who love high science, from the strait
Dead Sea of Sophistry sailing like us
Into Truth's ocean, bold and amorous,
Must in our haven anchor soon or late.

One calls this haunt a Care of Polyheme,
And one Atlante's palace, one of Crete
The Labyrinth, and one Hell's lowest pit.

Knowledge, grace, mercy, are an idle dream
In this dread place. Naught but fear dwells in it,
Of stealthy Tyranny the sacred seat.

A new critic would object to the obvious noticing this sonnet was composed by a dungeon inmate. The poet is the struggling mouse, battling the monster. But he cannot be trapped in jaws if he is still writing. Campanella's theory might oppose using the ancient world for imagery, but this early sonnet does combine

the lost continent of Atlantis with the Minotaur's rumbling in Crete's labyrinth. Yet our poet of imagination must always seek new worlds. His traveling imagery expands to the breaking point, but will not break, cannot break. Wherever his mind ranges is a "sacred place." He will endure. More sonnets need to be written.

Number 176

Holding the cynic lantern in your hand,
Through Europe, Egypt, Asia, you have passed,
Till at Ausonia's feet you find at last
That Cyclops' care, where I, to darkness banned.
In light eternal forge for you the brand
Against Abaddon, who hath overcast
The truth and right, Adami, made full fast
Unto God's glory by our steadfast band.
Go, smite each sophist, tyrant, hypocrite!
Girt with the arms of the first wisdom, free
Your country from the frauds that cumber it!
Swerve not: 'twere sin. How good, how great the praise
Of him who turns youth, strength, soul, energy,
Unto the dayspring of the eternal rays!

Adami is a contemporary philosopher. Again Campanella's imagery is ranging throughout the world. The Hermetic imagination can visit three civilizations in a single line. This is a poem of militant protest, composed by a prisoner who was likely to remain a prisoner. The poet himself is in Cyclops' cave, home of the violent one-eyed giant. But the next line begins, "In light eternal." The poet makes abrupt, sudden transitions, and his verse has a certain roughness. But he is not a pastoralist picking daisies beneath the sun. Rather he is combative, fighting for what he believes and can only believe, the truth of a Deity who opposes all hypocrisy, who shines lovingly on the poet's battleground.

Number 121

The world's a living creature, whole and great,
God's image, praising God whose type it is;
We are imperfect worms, vile families,
That in its belly have our low estate.

If we know not its love, its intellect,
Neither the worm within my belly seeks
To know me, but his petty mischief wreaks—
Thus it behooves us to be circumspect.

Again, the earth is a great animal,
Within the greatest; we are like the lice
Upon its body, doing harm as they
Proud men, lift up your eyes; on you I call:
Measure each being's worth, and thence be wise;
Learning what part in the great scheme you play.

The final line is unfortunately didactic. Campanella is far better at prophecy than preaching. Most poets are. This poet compares himself to a worm or lice, a microcosm in a world that is all-wonderful, a living creature, made in God's image, a world that praises its creator. Campanella again tears at extremes. Perhaps this world is not such a bad place to be a worm, especially if the worm has the potential—"Proud men, lift up your eyes"—and finds your proper place in the grand cosmic scheme. The abrupt transitions provide the poem a rapid welcome movement. Campanella is not a smooth, graceful poet—he does not pull down magic from the stars—but his stanzas do not contain dead weight or stiffness. Rather they charge effectively into each other. He is not predictable and that challenges the reader, maintains a bulldozing interest.

Number 123

The world's the book where the eternal sense
Wrote his own thoughts; the living temple where,
Painting his very self, with figures fair
He filled the whole immense circumference.
Here then should each man read, and gazing find
Both how to live and govern, and beware
Of godlessness; and, seeing God all-where,
Be bold to grasp the universal mind.
But we tied down to books and temples dead,
Copied with countless errors from the life—
These nobler than that school sublime we call.
O may our senseless souls at length be led
To truth by pairs, grief, anguish, trouble, strife!
Turn we to read the one original!

Spinoza would have liked this sonnet, even after several readings. God is both within and outside all. This is a devout pantheism that also infinitely transcends it. These also are the combined, imperishable values of Thrice-Great Hermes. Campanella is not a prisoner when he wrote this sonnet, no longer a mouse, but a full-fledged, shinning, human believer. Campanella shows no doubts in his poetry. This will also be true of his numerous, long, prose efforts. Even when his poems have images crashing and jarring together, he is assured where he is going. He does not doubt the infinite God who shines forth from whatever size candle he is using.

In all four sonnets quoted, Campanella uses abstract terms. He feels quite comfortable with them. We need to inquire if Campanella is delving into the deep meaning of Plato's Forms in use of these terms. We need keep in mind Headley's statement of how Campanella believes poetic words hold special magic powers.

Of course believing that and truly making it happen are very different occurrences. Great poets make it happen, like Shakespeare and Marlowe, the major poets studied in this book. Campanella, much as we admire him, does not qualify. His exaltation of intent makes him a fascinating theorist, and an excellent springboard to approach Shakespeare and Marlowe. But his own verse, though skillful and interesting, does not approach this level. This places Campanella in the overwhelming majority of the world's poets. His greatness appears in his long, courageous biography.

With regard to Plato's Forms—did Campanella have these concepts in mind while he composed? Campanella dealt with universal concepts whenever possible. This heroic persistence, under the darkest and gloomiest of circumstances, gives him a rare nobility. He is a far better thinker than poet, though the all-embracing universality of his thoughts inevitably heightens and strengthens his verse. Was he imitating Plato? Campanella showed an expertise on Plato's *Republic* when he composed his own prose utopia, *The City of the Sun*. If he was well aware of the Forms, he was certainly aware his abstract terms could be connected to them. His abstract terms are chosen carefully. He does not splash them about. Each finds a precise, carefully chiseled niche in his verse. He is not a great poet, but he is an exceptionally good one, and Symonds has provided us all an excellent service.

Campanella's closeness to Ficino is shown by Headley with the assistance of the classic scholarly work on Renaissance magic by D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, published in 1958. The year is 1630 and Campanella, no longer a dungeon inmate, is now a spiritual adviser to Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644), the pontiff who would cause such problems to Galileo. The pope required help from Campanella,

who had surely risen in the world, to ward off disease-bearing eclipses and the evil influences of Mars. This was surely not the pope to understand Galileo, and we also receive a strong hint why the great scientist never answered Campanella's letters. Only the late Renaissance could have produced such a varied and colorful cast of characters.

In assisting the pope, Campanella used magical practices learned directly from Ficino's *De Vita*, which Headley tells us was rewritten in a more demonic way in the *De fato siderali vitando*. We now quote directly from Headley.

Campanella's rite called for a sealed room, specially prepared with aromatic substances, decked with silks and branches, lit by two candles and five torches (representing the seven planets), infused with Jovial and Venereal music, and capped with the consumption of astrologically distilled liquors. The contrived room served both as a miniature model of the heavens and the stage for a religious ceremony directed toward planetary angels.

This was not a pope who should have been trying anybody for heresy. The seven large bumps on Campanella's head would only have added to the spectacle and authenticity. Headley writes his final convincing lines.

Ficino's sources were Neo-Platonic and Hermetic, which Campanella tried to fortify with the authority of St. Thomas in order to provide a magic with a demonic dimension sporting under the guise of being natural and spiritual. There was surely enough here to have the ceremony in normal circumstances fall afoul of Sixtus V's bull.

Pope Sixtus V passed considerable legislation in 1588, attempting to bring the papacy back to the height of medieval power. His different viewpoint did not hold. Surely Pope Sixtus, a close-fisted traditionalist, was turning over in his palatial grave at all that Campanella and his successor were doing.

We conclude our study of Campanella with a particular aspect of his *City of the Sun*, and how this connects with Book V of Plato's *Republic*, the most controversial passage Plato ever wrote. As always with Plato, Socrates does the talking, and the extended subject is an ideal community, a philosophic utopia, the Republic. Socrates insists the wisest men and women rule this republic, which would have the population base of a Greek city state. Socrates had no concept of the modern nation state, nor did Campanella. Both philosophers are creating utopias for less than half a million people. Neither had the thinking tools or motivation for better or higher specification.

The controversy comes from population control of the utopias. Socrates refers to his wise men and women as guardians, who are to form an enclosed community of sexual partners. Marriage nor monogamy are not concepts to be considered or practiced. All that matters, proclaims Socrates, is the finest men ceaselessly mate with the finest women, and thereby results an excellent crop of brilliant, talented, athletic children. Socrates realized such a child would not result from every guardian copulation, but he was playing the percentages. He lived in a rural society and understood barnyard breeding. He wanted those exceptional children, his Republic required them, and his plan of all-out free love among guardians should have adequate results.

Renaissance thinkers, post Ficino, had terrible difficulties with this passage. Ficino made his translation and wisely offered no commentary. This was a wickedly hot potato he left alone. But

the half century of devout Platonists who followed the great Ficino tried repeatedly to find a plausible excuse for Socrates' free love proposal. The most common excuse was Socrates' guardians were not people on earth but sanctified souls in heaven and therefore sexual practices were entirely spiritual and not bad at all. Obviously this excuse for Socrates, the wisest of men, is nonsense. Plato never showed Socrates bursting out laughing, but this might be the time.

Campanella earnestly read this advice from Socrates. In his *City of the Sun*, his utopia, he strongly advocated free love all the time from all his men and women. He was not talking about a very small, select group, like Socrates. Campanella, often one to take things to extremes, wanted free love for every man and woman capable of copulating. Socrates' sexual proposal might involve sixty adults, surely no more than eighty. Campanella might be urging free love for as many as a quarter of a million consenting adults. This is chaos beyond chaos. It is small wonder that Campanella spent more of his life below ground than above.

Campanella was never more outrageous, and this quality becomes more extreme from Headley's perceptive analysis. Socrates' always understood his sexual program was theory, like most of the *Republic*, and would never occur in his era or any era, in his part of the world or anywhere. Headley draws a direct contrast with Campanella. The rambunctious Italian at all times considered himself a prophet, and thereby strongly believed his *City of the Sun* was somewhere, someplace going to happen. That meant a city state with a quarter million adults wildly copulating without any moral or sanitary control would assuredly happen. The end times were coming—new comets had appeared, Galileo had discovered the satellites of Jupiter, Columbus had discovered a new world. These were indelible, millennial signs. The closer the

end time, the closer Campanella's utopia. Fortunately we are all still waiting.

Campanella is still waiting for a modern following. Perhaps he is just too strange, but he would have seemed just as strange in his time as in ours. His courage and fortitude are undeniable. Professor Headley has written an expertly researched book. What might be lacking are excellent translations of Campanella's major prose works. We need a John Addington Symonds in the twenty-first century. We need to meet Campanella on his own terms and that requires definitive scholarly editions with excellent translations.

In 1960, we did not know so much about Ficino. D. P. Walker's book in 1958 started an ever-growing interest. Then thirty years passed before the superb, poetic translations of Ficino's *Platonic Theology* by Michael D. B. Allen, were published in Latin-English texts in six volumes by Harvard University Press. Professor Allen has also translated Plato's *Commentaries on Phaedrus and Ion*, also with Harvard. We hope more volumes will follow. At this time we now have a wealth of Ficino texts to work with. In effect, he has become a major Renaissance thinker. As to Campanella, we do not yet know. We may have surprises. With Campanella, we can at least be sure of surprises.

Chapter Thirty-three:

Arthur Dee, Jacobean Magus and Son of John Dee

John Dee, the Prospero of Shakespeare's final play, and his second wife Jane Fromond were greeted with a newborn baby boy in 1579. They named the child Arthur, after the legendary British king. Arthur would not grow up to be a warrior or monarch, but he led a most interesting life. If he had set down his memoirs, they would be well worth reading. As the son of England's most famous magus, he spent a lifetime pursuing magical lore, with a special and sustained interest in alchemy.

This chapter will discuss his *Fasciculus Chemicus*, or *Chemical Collections*, an alchemical dialogue, in which historical characters with a known importance to alchemy perform as characters in a play, with of course, Arthur Dee controlling all the voices. This dialogue contains far more specific chemical information than most works on alchemy. Arthur Dee understood that alchemy has its secrets, but he did not compose a work shrouded in secrecy, as did so many others. It is easier to move from Arthur Dee to Robert Boyle than most alchemical writers of his era.

Dee's text should prove useful from an historical perspective in the history of science, but we regret not having his memoirs because of the fourteen years, 1621 to 1635, that he lived in Russia, most often Moscow. He was the rarest of western Europeans to do this. The immense difficulties of travel conditions, plus the lengthy distances involved, would have discouraged most. Then there is the Russian cold, which no European could have been prepared for.

Dee was an intelligent man and his comments should have been fascinating. He arrived in Moscow only a few years after the Romanovs had fully consolidated their power, and he stayed on during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, a monstrous leader unlike any Europe had ever witnessed. Whatever did Arthur Dee make of it all? How close did he come to mastering the Russian tongue? What kept him there for so very long, and however did he support himself? Our list of pertinent questions could go on, but the memoirs that would provide the answers is sadly lacking.

Dee's work *Chemical Collections* contains a lengthy prologue, called the Prolegomena, written by James Hassole, who provides the curious date of March 1649/50. Dee writes a brief preface to the reader dated March 1629, when he was in Russia. The dates are confusing, and would indicate more than one edition if Dee was not so far away. Dee had been out of Russia for fifteen years when Hassole made his contribution, which absorbs about ten percent of the work. Hassole never learned paragraphing. But he staunchly believed that alchemy was the true Hermetic art, and this satisfied Dee enough for his prominent inclusion.

Hassole is not likely to satisfy a modern reader, but that was never his intention. He believes authors should keep the "big matters" of alchemy a secret, so the readers can take pleasure in the search. This is rather like concluding a detective novel without

ever concluding who killed Colonel Higbee; detective novels do not deal with the deepest secrets of nature, as does alchemy.

Hassole might have read Chaucer's "Canon Yeoman's Tale," for he warns the reader to be wary of alchemical charlatans and frauds. A playgoer coming away from a fine performance of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* would not think this argument could be made too strongly. Hassole next makes an interesting comparison between mechanics and magic. The inner workings of a watch is mechanics. A salve that cures a human wound by being applied to the weapon that made the wound is magic. Hassole finds no serious difference between these two manipulations of nature, for both have long been found to be effective. He is a mid-seventeenth-century Hermeticist. We must grant him that.

We move now to Arthur Dee. His 1629 preface tells us ten little chapters will follow. He is the rare alchemist with a gift for brevity. He stresses how Nature and Art must work together in the successful alchemical lab.

Raymond Lull is the dominant speaker in the first chapter, and he expounds the wonders of quicksilver. This element is truly miraculous—the better word would no doubt be magical—for it can cause sustained lasting growth in metals, plants, animals. We wish Lull could be more specific. Growth in metals is the domain of alchemists—but animals? Will a giraffe nipping at the quicksilver find his neck growing even longer? Of course that speculation borders on the preposterous, but Lull does allow space for a great many questions.

In chapter three, several speakers do the talking. The emphasis is on correct proportions, which shows alchemy's path towards chemistry. But cosmic metaphors follow, as well as the need for alchemy to maintain a secret language. Aristotle is given

words that would never have been spoken by the original of that name.

Take thy dearest Son and joyn him equally to his white Sister, drink to them a Love cup, because the content of goodwill joins one thing to another. Pour on them sweet wine, till they be inebriated, and divided into smallest parts. But remember that all clean things agree most aptly with clean things, otherwise they will generate sons unlike themselves.

John Dustin, a known alchemist, follows Aristotle and ends the dialogue in the third chapter with the following: "Thou must impose three thirds of moisture, and one of dry; for in the beginning of thy operation help the Work in the Solution by the Moon, and the Congelation by the Sun."

This makes far better poetry than chemistry, and yet of course it is neither, for it is alchemy, its own special genre of writing, and Arthur Dee does it far better than most. He concludes his third chapter with a Corollary, a long mish-mash of cosmic symbols, but attains significance for he does firmly introduce the Great Chain of Being, and thereby presents a cosmos of precisely graded hierarchies, which would have satisfied both Shakespeare and Ficino. It should be noted that all these numerous readers of numerous alchemical tracts were not difficult to please. They liked being taken in by the deep secrecy, even if it never led them anywhere. They liked the great originality of language that often appeared. They liked being part of the game.

In chapter four, George Ripley, a famed alchemical poet, expounds how a secret soul exists between heaven and earth and how all known properties, including human life, come from it. He provides no metaphors nor details, and he is not challenged by

other speakers. Presumably they agreed. But the curious reader will have much to ponder.

Artephius keeps this chapter moving by talking about the four different types of fire. Like so many students of alchemy, Artephius is happiest when he is classifying things. Yet like many alchemists, his classifications lack the specificity useful for true chemistry or science. Consider his discussion on the third fire.

The third is that Naturall Fire of our Water, which is also called against Nature, because it is Water, and nevertheless of it makes meer Spirit, which thing common Fire cannot doe: this is Minerall, Equall, + participates of Sulphur, it destroys, congeals, dissolves, and calcines all things, this penetrating, subtile, not burning, and it is the fountain of living Water, in which the King and Queen wash themselves, which we stand in need of, in the whole Work, in the beginning, middle, and end, but not of the other two, except sometimes onely.

What exactly does “sometimes only” mean? What does any of this mean? Reading Ripley’s extensive definitions of the three other fires will not help—be assured of that. The other speakers do not query Ripley, and this provides a strong hint of Dee’s rhetorical method: his speakers are not talking to each other but only to themselves. They are teachers, professors, and used to being in front of the class. To indicate they are not clear, or might not know what they are talking about, would be rude and ill-mannered, and Dee will not allow that. His solo speakers are gentlemen, first and foremost. They do not need to be highly informative to attain a high respect, for it is already there

Chapter five stresses how heaven and earth must come together for the creation of the philosopher’s stone. Dee wants that

stone. He would rather heal men than attain riches. His basic values are not out of place.

Artephius explain how human bodies must be burnt free of sin by a scalding purgation process for earth to join heaven. The human being has become the alembic or alchemical lab. “O Nature how dost thou burn Bodies into Spirit, which could not be done, which could not first be done, if the Spirit were not first incorporated with the Bodies, and with the Spirit made volatile, and afterwards permanent. Therefore the compound receives its cleansing by our Fire: viz. by dissolving the humid and the subliming what is pure and white, the dregs being cast forth, as a Naturall Vomit.”

Artephius does not specify which of the four fires he is using—perhaps by this time the reader should know this—but he is definitely transforming the human body into an alchemical lab. Consider his next sentence: “For in such a Dissolution and naturall Sublimation, there is made a deligation of the Elements, a cleansing and separation of the pure from impure, so that the pure and white ascends upwards, and the impure and earthy remains fixt in the bottome of the Vessel, which is to be cast forth and removed (because it is of no value) by receiving only a middle white substance.”

Alchemy has become sacramental. The alembic has replaced the confessional box. Artephius concludes this mystifying passage, picking up from his middle white substance: “And in this is accomplitsh our Philosophicall and Naturall Sublimation, not in the Vulgar unfit Mercury, which hath no qualities like these, with which our Mercury drawn from the red servant is adorned.”

He might just as well have said red serpent. Maybe the typesetter got it wrong all those years ago. Unlikely. A better question is from where does all this Mercury come into play. An

alchemist can be like a fast-dealing poker player with a dozen decks of cards. We are either intently alert readers or the game is too much for us. With Artephius, game might be a proper metaphor. He holds to basic ground rules—four kinds of fire, a regular progression of alchemical acts—but his variations are sudden and unexpected. Maybe he is closer to true chemistry than we give him credit. If we could only follow his endlessly meandering metaphors, we might not be so surprised at all.

Arthur Dee is now approaching his finish line. In chapter six, his speakers show how the four elements of Aristotle can be transmuted into each other: water and fire transmuted into earth and air. If this can be accomplished with the basic forms underlying all matter, it can certainly be done with metals. The next chapter imitates Shakespeare's seven ages of man, for the metaphor of the alchemical process must go through four stages, in correlation with the four basic elements: embryo, infant, boy, man. This metaphor is easy to follow, but like so many alchemical images, excruciatingly difficult to transfer to a lab.

Dee is moving swiftly now. In chapter eight, titled "Of Fermentation," his speaker Toladamus claims the wondrous elixir all seek has three parts: spirit, body, soul. Again the processes within the alembic are strongly compared to human processes. The alchemist is the process. But if he maintains these three parts in steady equilibrium and reverence, he cannot fail.

The final two chapters contradict each other, which should not be too surprising in a work of this nature. Artephius is back in chapter nine with the startling promise that a grain of alchemical gold can be multiplied into a hundred grains, then a thousand, then infinity. He does not mention the economic problems an infinity of grains of gold would cause in Europe, or how like blades of grass, their value would rapidly decrease, but because this time Artephius

is an alchemist displaying greed, he is most unlikely to get there, and so we have no need of these probing questions. By contrast with Artephius, Arthur Dee closes his work with the urgency of specific measurement at all steps of the alchemical process. He might have read his Archimedes. This leads to the striking question why no alchemist appears to have done this.

Arthur Dee is interested in the symbols and mystical powers of alchemy. Without genuine divine intervention, he could not have achieved either gold or the philosopher's stone. But perhaps he did expect such intervention, and the alchemical quest was truly a mystical one. This can hardly be true in all instances, perhaps in very few, but Artephius does connect the process to the human body, and that brings the body as close as possible to the sacred processes of alchemy, and a substratum of that could very well mean bringing the human closer to God. This is the beginning of mysticism, a very awkward rough-hewn mysticism, but mysticism all the same.

Chapter Thirty-four:

Johann Reuchlin, the Far-reaching Influence of His Kabbalah

In 1490 Johann Reuchlin was a notable German scholar, excelling in Greek and Latin, with a strong potential interest in the Hebrew of the Old Testament. That year would prove of tremendous significance to Reuchlin, for he made a prolonged visit to Florence where he made the prolonged acquaintance of both Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. Both the famous Florentines would take kindly to Reuchlin. Ficino would increase his interest in magic and Platonic studies. Reuchlin would always remember this, but what he learned from Pico would transform the remaining three decades of his life and a major branch of European studies.

Pico was the first Christian of any intellectual brilliance and originality to study the Kabbalah, the Jewish mysticism that came in many complex forms and required a detailed, thorough knowledge of Hebrew. Kabbalah sought new and unexpected links between Old Testament passages—sometimes only a phrase or line—that produced enriched, powerful, spiritual meaning in these original combinations. If Kabbalah sounds complicated, oh yes it is. For Pico (and Ficino) Hebrew was a language which God actually spoke—to Adam in the Garden, to Moses on Mount

Sinai—and therefore a language of profound holiness. Amazing miracles could be achieved by dazzling manipulations of Hebrew, and only the skilled, highly educated Kabbalist could do this. It was worth a life's effort and study. We repeat material on Hebrew from our Pico chapter.

The Hebrew language contains twenty-two consonants, and these each receive a numerical value of one to twenty-two. Hebrew has no vowels, and instead uses diacritical marks above the consonants. Using those numerical values in Kabbalah is called gematria. Each Hebrew word will, of course, have consonants which can be added up. If two words or phrases have the same number, their spiritual content will be similar and this coincidence should therefore be meditated on. A simple example: Mount Sinai and Jacob's Ladder add up to the same number, and profound meditations should result on this similarity. Coincidences abound in Kabbalah, which unites it to spiritual forms of occult thinking which emphasizes connections. Advanced gematria provides endless connections, because letters can be moved from one word to another. The language is sacred ... it is God's language ... and its powers, if manipulated properly, are virtually endless.

Reuchlin learned this from Pico, and the German was forever inspired. Pico died tragically at thirty-one, and that left one Christian of talent and originality remaining in Europe to practice Kabbalah—Johann Reuchlin. Back in Germany, Reuchlin found private Jewish teachers who were masters of Hebrew. He was an apt, dedicated pupil. Reuchlin became his own master of Hebrew. Other Christians would join him by the second decade of the sixteenth century. He would no longer be alone. Reuchlin studied Kabbalah for the sake of Kabbalah. He remained a devout Christian, though now somewhat controversial, and felt no desire to convert to Judaism. Instead he hoped to convert great multitudes

of Jews to the Christian faith by his mastery of Kabbalah. This did not happen, not even to a small extent. Kabbalah is simply too difficult. Reuchlin's thinking was seriously faulty; how many Jews would master Kabbalah to convert to Christianity? Answer: not many—not even a few—perhaps none.

But Reuchlin's stature as a Hebrew scholar would have an important effect on Christian scholars who united in the early sixteenth century in what came to be called, "the battle of the books." Hidebound Christians with blinders—obviously with no knowledge of Kabbalah or any Jewish mysticism or philosophy—wanted to build vast bonfires of Jewish literature. Reuchlin was the dominant voice in opposition, and he was soon supported by the dominantly influential Erasmus. The Christian arsonists lost to a great extent. Countless Hebrew books were saved from the flames. If Reuchlin had done nothing else with his life, he should be well remembered.

But Reuchlin composed two works explicating Kabbalah, which have lasting value. No other Renaissance texts describe the basics and details of this complex mystical methodology in language that can be clearly understood by the non-Hebrew scholar. Hence Reuchlin made Kabbalah accessible and inviting to Christians throughout the sixteenth century. He died in 1522, prematurely as did Pico, but his work would live long after him. In the late nineteenth century, occultists in western Europe, with precious little knowledge of Hebrew, developed a strong interest in Kabbalah, and added it to their repertoire of magical practices, a curious imitation of their predecessors, far better educated in all aspects of magic, throughout the Renaissance.

Reuchlin's two works on Kabbalah are separated by twenty-seven years. In 1494, only four years after his visit to Florence, he published *The Miracle-Working Word*, which focuses

on one Hebrew word manipulation, a stunning example of gematria which convinced Reuchlin and his ever-growing number of Christian followers that Kabbalah contained spiritual truth of the highest order. A transliteration of Hebrew into English is helpful to make Reuchlin's point. The letters IHUH form the sacred Tetragrammaton, the name for Yahweh, which should never be pronounced by devout Jews and thereby spoken with a hushed reverence, if at all, by devout Christians. S is a letter that stands for fire, divine fire, with perhaps the power to turn water into wine. Reuchlin inserted the S in the center of Yahweh's name and the result was IHSUH, now the Pentagrammaton, a five-letter name, but not just any name, for this name that Reuchlin constructed is the miracle-word of his work's title: IHSUH is the name Jesus.

If this smacks of trickery or hocus-pocus to the modern mind, this was not the case at the close of the Quattrocento when Reuchlin published. Hebrew was the language of Yahweh, and the Old Testament had been carefully dictated word-by-word by Yahweh. The magical connection Reuchlin found could not be there by accident. Yahweh had known about it all the time. If one verbal secret of deep spiritual significance could be found, so could others, many others, the limitation being only the wisdom and skill of the Hebrew linguist. Prayer and religious ritual must also be part of the process. Angels will always be of assistance, especially in driving away the inevitable evil daemons who try to get into the act. Angels and Kabbalah are all-powerful, especially when accompanied by prayer and ritual. Language becomes prayer, but only if it is the single language of Yahweh's all-conquering voice.

Reuchlin next published on Kabbalah in 1517. No explanation exists for the long gap in time, other than Reuchlin, the most dedicated and patient of scholars, was slowly but surely

mastering Hebrew. He surely was the finest Hebraist of his era who was not born in a Jewish home. He is best remembered for his second work, *The Art of Kabbalah*. The work is divided into three books. It is a philosophical dialogue—the influence of Plato and thereby Ficino is obvious—with thee speakers: Simon is a young Jew, a student of Kabbalah; Philolaus, a Pythagorean; and, Marranus, a Moslem. Having a Moslem for a speaker is a curious aspect of the work; Marranus is a devout Moslem, a good man, and yet he rarely makes a specific comment about his faith. Since Reuchlin was so dedicated to introducing Christians to Kabbalah, why should he not have included a Christian speaker, well-versed in his faith? Reuchlin lived and worked in Germany. He was not likely to convert many Moslems.

Reuchlin repeats his gematria of the wonder-working word. This should not be surprising. He will never achieve a better example of the astounding spiritual power of his linguistic manipulations, and so he should be expected to use it at each opportunity. Reuchlin provides a stunning wealth of new information in his second work, which accounts for its lasting influence and popularity.

Simon, the young Kabbalist, tells familiar Old Testament stories, which he assumes his two listeners know by heart, and adds to their power by the very fact they were originally written in Hebrew. The Moslem does not dispute this, but listens closely. Simon introduces the ten Sephirot, a dynamic and essential part of Kabbalah, which does not rely on an expertise in Hebrew. Each Sephirot is an abstract quality of Yahweh, and they form a hierarchy of ten. Philolaus the Pythagorean would have taken interest in that number ten, the most sacred of numbers in his belief system. The ten Sephirot can take different formations, a temple, a tree, a pyramid. Simon never states his preference, nor does he

provide the usual mechanical, rote listing of the ten. His two listeners can, for now, be grateful.

Ein Sof is the top-ranking attribute of Yahweh, and maintaining the same belief system as Dionysius, Nicholas of Cusa, and numerous other mystics, this term cannot be adequately explicated in human terms. No term would be adequate. Ein Sof is defined by a reverent study of the limitation of definitions when dealing with the single cause of all definitions. Neither the Pythagorean nor the Moslem wish to debate, perhaps because they are not exactly sure what they are hearing.

The other nine Sephirot are understandable: Crown indicates Yahweh's rule of the universe, Beauty and Wisdom and Understanding takes these virtues to the highest possible level, the infinite level of Yahweh—so they also could not be truly understood if Simon stubbornly desired to pursue this difficult theology. The abstractions can be linked in different, complex ways; hence placing the ten Sephirot on the trunk and branches of a metaphysical tree can reveal new, startling revelations of meaning. Kabbalah is a form of mysticism, and this quiet intensity of experience is what mystics forever seek after.

Simon's discussion, still in Book One, allows Kabbalah to enter other forms of magic and spirituality. The divine abstractions are similar to Plato's Ideal Forms, which are ideal virtues or traits that exist in a supernal realm, unavailable to humans bound to earth, and whose existence is only known by philosophical deductions of such humans. Kabbalah's deductions are intensely spiritual, but both systems are microcosm-macrocosm structures. The Renaissance reader of magical texts would swiftly and eagerly have noticed this structure as well as the emphasis on supernal hierarchy. He might learn the Hebrew alphabet, he might not, he might master Hebrew, he might not, but he will have entered a

familiar comfort zone, first entered by Pico, and he will wish to stay there, discovering how to manipulate words and letters, learning more and more. Simon also finds this cosmic Hermetic balance—as above, so below—in Solomon’s temple, which represents the heavens above. Simon is not specific about temple details, but his listeners could be expected to know Solomon was a celebrated practitioner of ancient magic, and of course Solomon performed his magical utterances in Hebrew. Simon also finds Jacob’s Ladder as a connecting link between earth and heaven, microcosm and above.

Simon also involved Kabbalah with a Neo-Platonic cosmic system. Three worlds exist in a hierarchy that Ficino would have found familiar. Heaven is the highest-ranking world, the home of Yahweh and heavenly things. These “things” would be the upper levels of Sephirot or Platonic Forms. Like a Renaissance magus, Reuchlin (or Simon) will always be solemnly eclectic. The second world contains “elements and categories.” which for humans can only be accessible to the mystical experience. These two terms are lower levels of the Sephirot and more Platonic Forms. If Simon had not been a Kabbalist, he would not have mentioned this second world. The third or lowest world belongs to humans, created in Yahweh’s image and likeness, and yet still lowest. Simon feels no need to mention plants and creeping things.

Simon deals with another intellectual battle of the early, pre-Lutheran, sixteenth century: ask what kind of messiah should the Jewish people expect? A warrior messiah as predicted by Talmud or a spiritual messiah as predicted by Kabbalah? Of course Simon favors the latter, for his author Reuchlin is a devout Christian who believes the spiritual messiah has already come, sixteen centuries ago. Reuchlin, for all his intense study of Hebrew and Jewish lore, never gave up hope of converting Europe’s Jews

to Christianity. His success was at best minimal. He did interest multitudes of Christians in Judaism, but he died too soon to feel this irony.

Book Two of *The Art of Kabbalah* is surprising, for Simon the Kabbalist does not make an appearance. The day is Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, and so Simon must remain in reverent enclosure with his own people. His absence allows Philolaus and Marranus to talk the full, second day together. Philolaus the Pythagorean will do most of the talking. Curiously his Moslem companion listens with respect, patience, and interest. As a Pythagorean, Philolaus is convinced of the sacred powers of numbers, and he provides a basic summation of standard numerology, which could be found in most textbooks on the occult. Monad is the divine one and important in monotheistic faiths. Four represents justice, because a perfect square of equal size makes an excellent symbol of justice. The five Platonic solids did not just happen; the Deity made them that way, and so they should be held sacred. We need not provide more examples. Philolaus can quote from many ancient authors. He is impressive, and he tries hard to be.

Philolaus has a monumental purpose. He knows so much about the ancient world and Pythagorean thought that he qualifies as an expert. Marranus certainly does not dissent. Philolaus uses his expertise to make a startling proclamation: all Pythagorean teaching derived from Kabbalah. The Kabbalah was there first, and thereby trumps Pythagoras' originality. Pythagoras comes before Plato and Aristotle, Thales and Anaximander—hence Kabbalah is the oldest of mystical or spiritual systems. In Ficino's age which extended to Reuchlin, the most ancient philosophers, and theologians (and magicians) were the greatest, the finest, the most profound, the source of all future wisdom, the best. This is the

astounding claim Philolaus makes for Kabbalah, a subject he only learned about yesterday, in Book One. We should not press Reuchlin too hard on this infringement of reality, but focus on his magnificent commitment to Kabbalah. His closest friends were Jewish masters. It can be assumed these rabbis learned a little something from him.

Simon returns to Book Three, and again dominates the talking. Whatever Simon failed to mention about Kabbalah in Book One, he will relate now. Philolaus and Marranus remain avid listeners. Marranus is certainly having a cultural experience unlike most Moslems, and that might be why he listens so closely. Simon shows an interest in numbers; Kabbalah has fifty gates of knowledge and thirty-two gates of wisdom, and the combined number of seventy-two is the gematria for Tetragrammaton. He also lists seventy sacred names. Book Three will have several long lists. Simon means not only to convince by lists, he means to overwhelm. He now, at last, lists all ten Sephirot with their attributes. If his listeners wanted more knowledge of the Sephirot after Book One, that problem will be no more. Simon proves a beautiful poet, by reciting several pages of original psalms based on Kabbalah's linguistic manipulations. These psalms are the one time Rechlin's work truly becomes significant literature. They could convince a reader with an innate capacity for faith, any faith, so long as it be monotheistic and passionately sincere—and perhaps Reuchlin, in the dark hours of a troubled sleepless night, had this one basic concept, cosmic and individual, firmly in mind after all.

Chapter Thirty-five:

Basil Valentinè, Master Alchemist

In the pursuit of occult or alchemical texts from the Renaissance, the modern scholar is often grateful for the offerings of the very small press. To the followers of Paracelsus, lasting more than a century and a half after the master died in 1541, an honored name in alchemy was Basil Valentine. Valentine agreed with Paracelsus that a successful alchemical process required three specific elements: sulphur, mercury, and salt. Salt was controversial, for most alchemists were satisfied with the other two. Hence Valentine becomes an ardent Paracelsian, and his name appears on a half dozen alchemical works that Paracelsus would have found no argument with, though we make that statement with caution.

Paracelsus took a strange, perverse pleasure in arguing with most scholars he came in contact with—and then there is the larger issue of Valentine's identity. True, his name appears on the title page of significant alchemical works, but otherwise no solid evidence can be found that he existed. He is a famous pen-name like Christian Rosenkreutz, author of the Rosicrucian treatises. The Rosicrucian author can be traced to Johann Valentin Andreæ

(1586-1654), but no such luck with Basil Valentine. Andreae's middle name is alluring but does not help, for Valentine's legend begins at the close of the fourteenth century. He precedes both Andreae and Paracelsus. He is rumored to be a Benedictine monk in the fifteenth century—not exactly a pinpoint clue—but the rumor remains only that.

Valentine's most notable work is *The Triumphal Chariot of Antimony*, an alchemical treatise that is surprisingly well-written, with smooth, clear sentences, an understanding of paragraphing, an avoidance of mystical symbolic language impossible for anyone but the author and his closest associates to understand. We have explained the solid popularity of this work from Paracelsus to Boyle. It would be a rare adept who did not have this volume on his shelf. But the twenty-first century scholar, wanting to read the alchemical texts read by Boyle and Newton, perhaps Marlowe and Shakespeare, must turn to a very small press: The Alchemical Press, located in Edmonds, WA. This most useful press has eleven titles in print, including, *The Mirror of Alchemy* by Roger Bacon. Where else would a modern scholar find that useful work by Bacon? Another title is *Pythagorean Precepts* by Thomas Taylor. Taylor was a close friend of William Blake, and he translated Plotinus, Proclus, Porphyry into English, efforts which can also only be found in small presses.

We turn to *The Triumphal Chariot*. Above all, Valentine is a devout Christian alchemist. If Milton read Valentine, he would have admired him. Valentine begins with a solemn invocation to God. He could have done it no other way.

Therefore, let all your hope be stayed in God, and
let constant prayer, to impart you this Blessing be
the beginning of your work, in order that you may

safely reach the end, for the “fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.”

After the invocation, Valentine requires a contemplation, the favorite practice of Ficino, and the Florentine would have admired Valentine’s methods. Valentine declares contemplation to be of two kinds: the impossible and the possible. He cherishes the former, which “consists in endless meditation, which can have no result because their object is intangible. Such problems are the Eternity of God, the Sin against the Holy Ghost, the infinite Nature of the Godhead. They are incomprehensible, and necessarily baffle the infinite inquirer,”

The possible side of contemplation is call *Theoria*, and “deals with the tangible and visible which has a temporal form.” This *Theoria* includes the basic process of alchemy: calcinations, sublimation, circulation, reverberation, putrefaction, digestion, distillation, cohabitation, and fixation.

What Valentine seems to be saying is the alchemical process is possible because the adept has long contemplated on the impossible. Is a slight tinge of greed involved in his contemplation of the eternal Godhead, the impossible mystery? Valentine would adamantly deny this. It is a commonplace of alchemical doctrine—spiritual, mystical, hardheaded practical—that an adept feeling greed can never turn base metals into silver or gold. Above all, purity of intention is required. This purity is required to make gold or the philosopher’s stone, or hold any chance of doing so. Because Valentine expresses this purity so well, in all its ramifications, he maintained a longstanding readership.

Valentine is not finished with the sustained virtue of his process. He begins with a solemn invocation, proceeds with a sustained contemplation, and now his third and final essential step is preparation. The alchemist is first and foremost a healer.

Paracelsus and Valentine were both physicians. Even if the alembic did not produce the philosopher's stone, always a most unlikely occurrence, herbal remedies could be more valuable than gold to the suffering patient who found himself undergoing a quick healing process.

What Valentine meant by preparation was knowledge, profound, wide-ranging, practical. The adept must know the human body and, of the utmost importance, understand the difference between external and internal wounds. What this probably means—Valentine is weak on examples—is the cause of illness might not appear to the unaided, untrained, naked eye. Internal bleeding can be just as dangerous as blood pouring from an open wound. The adept should never stop studying, never stop trying to learn new things.

A must for Valentine is to always add the sacred to his methods. As the essential part of his preparation, the adept must revere Jesus, the Son of God, the greatest of all healers. No adept can heal, or even attempt to heal, without humbly placing himself in the divine hands of the ultimate healer. If the human soul is not healed, whether belonging to adept or patient, the condition of the body is not of particular importance. The suffering human should take comfort from Jesus who endured the most intense suffering. The suffering patient shall always take comfort from Jesus' love.

Antimony is next defined by Valentine. His definition is original and can only be carried out by an adept with sacred intent. The adept also requires that Paracelsian trilogy: sulphur, mercury, salt. Valentine insists he did not learn his method from books but from other alchemists. Since nobody has ever been able to pin down Valentine's identity, these other alchemists are of course impossible to find. He is vague, perhaps deliberately so, about how he arrives at his antimony, a material unlike any other. It is the

philosopher's stone and then some. Whatever it looks like, however it smells, we can be assured that antimony is the good from the alembic that replaces evil. Sin and diseases are healed, and of course all of this happens by God's will, after patient and healer have long contemplated on Jesus.

The miracles are not small. Antimony is deadly poisonous until the adept works at it in his alembic, artfully guiding the fires beneath. Of course we would like more details. Of course we would like one, good, solid, serious detail. But this is not the nature of alchemical writing, which traditionally offers so much and explains so very little. If making the philosopher's stone could be described in a thirty-page pamphlet, with the chemical equations Pasteur would approve, then there would never be a need for another pamphlet, and the great alchemical tradition, with all its magnificent mysteries and hopes, would reach a sudden dead-end in the road and be over.

Pasteur's pamphlet might even be a disappointment. A similar pamphlet—say five pages—that provided assured, accurate, rather simple, chemical directions for changing tin to gold would also stop alchemy in its tracks, and again, cries and lamentations of disappointment. Readers wanted the spellbinding mystery and all-encompassing hope that Valentine and other alchemical writers of his ilk provided. A detective novel is not entertaining if you learn who killed Colonel Higbee on the first page. Alchemy was about imagination and endless pondering. Basil Valentine, whoever he was, had a deep sense of all this. When he pauses briefly to talk about beermaking, he is again being entertaining. For readers with a deep need for Christian piety, Valentine is always there to take their hand.

The widespread popularity of alchemical tracts, from Paracelsus to Newton, can be understood if we fathom Valentine

correctly. Above all, he was neither scientist nor chemist. He never provided an answer, but he produced an endless stream of fascinating questions. He asked the eternal questions in new form. His pearls of wisdom could be found, but the reader had to glean rather hard. Yet that was the essential entertainment, the sacred magic, the newfound meanings where explications of life's odd events are often lacking. Valentine never made it easy, and if nobody ever knew who he was, that made the mysteries all the more interesting.

Chapter Thirty-six:

Jean of Spain, Master Alchemist

Jean of Spain, also known as Jean D'Espagnet, wrote two notable alchemical treatises, *The Summary of Physics Restored* and *Arcanum Hermetic*. We shall discuss both. We can assume Jean of Spain was more secretive than even most alchemists, for his name does not appear on the title page of either work in their first English translations, the *Summary* appearing in 1650 and the *Arcanum Hermetic* in 1651. James Hasolle translated the *Arcanum* into English, though from what language the title page does not say. Since the *Arcanum* was published only a year after the *Summary*, it would not be a wild guess that Hasolle translated both works. The *Summary* did have a French edition in 1623, but no evidence exists that Hasolle was working from that language.

Jean was, of course, Spanish, and he is the only Spanish writer to appear in our entire study. If he wrote in his native Spanish, alchemical works or otherwise, those efforts have been lost. We do not even know how much, if at all, he was involved with the 1623 French edition of the *Summary*. His geographical details are scanty, and could fill the single page of the inside of a family Bible. We are not even certain of the years of his birth and

death, though he was born sometime close to 1560 and died no later than 1637. Legal documents in his hand stop in that year.

This lack of precise information about Jean of Spain should not be surprising, and it does provide us with a strong hint about his readers. These readers, by and large, were not cloistered in an ivory tower, but were either practicing alchemists themselves or soon hoped to be. The title page was not of all-abiding interest to them, but the content was. A modern reader might suspect Jean of Spain was a pen name. To the red-eyed man puffing extra oxygen into his alembic, this thought never would have occurred to him. What mattered who Jean of Spain was? Maybe he was two or three people. What matter! All that mattered was what he said and how successfully the aspiring alchemist could put it to use.

Hence we shall discuss the content and how Jean's two works typify and differ from the traditional alchemical treatise, which by the mid seventeenth century had become a literary genre, though a minor one.

Jean of Spain opens his *Summary of Physics Restored* in familiar fashion. The fierce debate between followers of Aristotle and Plato is not relevant to the high Hermetic priest of alchemy. He promptly enters an hierarchical scheme, a backbone of most Renaissance magical thinking. Jean's hierarchy has three regions, another commonplace: 1.) the super-celestial, which is intelligible, 2.) the celestial which is the middle, and 3.) the sub-celestial, which is totally corporeal. It is hard to understand how these classifications are supposed to help a heavily breathing alchemist with his sleeves rolled up before a fire, but presumably the materials in his alembic must work at all three levels for his sacred process to be successful. Those three levels come from Ficino, and are the structure of Agrippa's *The Occult Philosophy*. Jean of

Spain will always give the alchemist confidence that he stands on holy or solid ground.

Jean's *Summary* contains one brilliant idea, a metaphor that combines God's creation in opening *Genesis* and the challenging alchemical process. Jean divides this work into 245 paragraphs, with his comparison starting at paragraph twenty and continuing unabated to the end. To restore physics, or to restore alchemy, is to reunite it with all creation, those opening six days of *Genesis* when all creation took place. As God separated light from darkness, so the alchemist separates chemicals within his alembic. As God separated the waters, the alchemist separates the gases. But we are only striking the surface of a metaphor that continues for 245 paragraphs.

Jean is not the only alchemical writer to make this comparison—the connection almost cries out to be noticed—but no one else composed a short book working out all the possible ramifications he could think of when moving about the alchemist's lab and recalling those famous passages of opening *Genesis*. Jean insists the Sun is the center of all creation. He has read both Copernicus and Thrice-Great Hermes. No other alchemical writer is so insistent upon the Sun's central role. The Sun is the eye of the Creator, which gives out all spirit and life. Nature, and therefore alchemy, functions through the light and heat of the Sun. Jean will contradict himself, by calling earth the heaviest planetary body and therefore centrally located in the planetary system. But this brief passage does not take away from the extended rhapsodies to the Hermetic sun. Since the alchemist requires light and heat, he has no choice but to borrow those supernal powers of the sun. Ficino could have followed all this. He also liked comparisons and they share those all-important hierarchies. A major difference is Jean provides no mention of the Demiurge, the cosmic creator of Plato

in the *Timaeus*. Ficino took the *Timaeus* very seriously, especially since it was the only Platonic dialogue known throughout the European middle ages. Obviously both men fell to their knees with bowed heads when contemplating the Creator of opening *Genesis*.

Jean's pious praise of the Sun can be seen in paragraph 36.

The Sun is a transparent mirror of the Divine Glory, which being seated above the sense and strength of material creatures, did frame this glass, by whose resplendency the beams of his Eternal Light might be communicated by reflection to all his works, and so should by this reflection be rendered discernable. For it is beyond the capacity of any mortal to have any immediate view of that Divine Light. This is the Royal Eye of the Divinity which doth conferre by his presence, life, and liberty to his suppliants.

Royal Eye is a common figure in alchemical art, and as used by the Freemasons, can be seen on the U.S. dollar bill. These old images are more far-reaching than one might expect. The key phrase of the above quote is, "did frame this glass," for alembics can only be made of glass; thus Jean's glass is a source of Eternal Light. If the alchemical fires are that powerful, the adept is off to a good start. Of course he contemplates the Sun and all its Hermetic powers. Any alchemist or magus constantly working with earthbound fire would eventually come to ponder the divine and living symbol of his prolonged undertaking. Alchemical art often shows the Royal Eye as the Sun. It all comes together in both the cosmos and the pear-shaped alembic.

In paragraph 94, Jean does mention Plato, but with regards to the *Symposium*, not the *Timaeus*. The *Symposium* is the dialogue about love, which inspired Ficino to write an extensive

commentary, and Jean might have felt himself in full agreement. We quote the short paragraph in full.

Love, styled by Plato the Eldest of the gods, was breath'd into nature, begotten by the Divine Spirit, and hath the place of a Genius in her dispositions. In the first Division of the World, betwixt the two brothers, she gave the judgement for the partitions of their families, and after had alwayes the Praefecture in Generation.

Alchemy is about divisions, the coming apart and joining back together of chemical materials. The two brothers are not Cain and Abel—they never created anything—but two chemicals, or primary substances. In Jean's cosmos, this would be water and air. He will never stray far from the possibilities within the alembic.

The next paragraph, number 40, is much longer, but we quote it in full, because Jean's complex writing shows at its finest. His two metaphors are inextricably linked. He talks of process, and different stages of process, always true in alchemy. He emphasizes love, and the adept must always hold purity of heart for his process to be a success. The alchemist who loves gold will not make good, no matter how correct his procedures. If the alchemist's love for God and humanity transcends all other feelings, especially greed, his alembic just might produce a precious metal. Now watch Jean unravel his comic imagery.

The God of Nature did fix the first bond of Love in the things in Nature, between the first Matter and the Universal Form, the Heaven and the Earth, Light and Darkness, Plenty and Poverty, Beauty and deformity. The second degree of Love from the first couple, which is as it were the loving embraces of the Parents, issued into the Elements, which having

a fraternal tye to bind them, have divided betwixt them the whole right of Nature. The third and last degree, is compleated in mixed bodies, which excites them by the in-born and in-bred sparkles of love, to a propagation and multiplication of their like. The Divine Love hath appointed this treble Love-knot, as a kind of Magical tye, that it might deliver it self by traduction into all and every part of his workmanship. Love is the Base of the Universe, the Cube of Nature, and the fastening bond of things above and below.

That final line is the thesis statement of the famous Emerald Tablet, long attributed by serious tradition to Thrice-Great Hermes, who proclaims, “as above, so below.” Countless occult works have been based on that transcendent conclusion. Though his language might be difficult and at times impenetrable, Jean adheres closely to traditional alchemical imagery, such as the common marriage metaphor. Many alchemists talk of a king and queen coming together, with their marriage meant to represent mercury and sulphur, the primary ingredients of work in the alembic.

Instead Jean uses our first parents, “the first couple,” as metaphors between the first Matter and Uniform Forms, the first union of the first couple. Adam and Eve arrived soon after creation. King and Queen might not have been strong enough for what Jean meant to accomplish. His primal marriage metaphor brings together several other pairs of cosmic abstractions, Heaven and Earth, Light and Darkness. This is the second degree of love for our first couple. Hence the process of creation is repeated, and alchemy is nothing but a continual repetition of processes. A

healthy dose of love, or purity of intention, would certainly be of help.

Jean of Spain is not an easy writer to paraphrase, certainly not for 245 paragraphs, several quite lengthy. In paragraph 129, he compares alchemy to the natural process of rainfall, where moisture rises from the ground, forms clouds, then the process completes when the clouds produce rain. The water in the ground eventually turns to rising moisture and the process commences again. Of course, a third-grade student could explain this, no doubt with charming drawings in crayola, but Jean explicates how the rain process is very similar to what occurs in the active alembic. Moisture does rise from the charcoal floor of the alembic, and the moisture turns to fog, which condenses and descends down the thin curved arms of the alembic till reaching the charcoal, the return point. A beginning adept would learn this on his first day in the lab. Jean's analogy seems so simple when spread out on the page, but an original mind was required to conceive it, and this mind persisted in perceiving alchemy in cosmic, supernal, love-filled, divine terms. Having read Jean, the adept on his first day in the lab would have no doubts about the value of what he was attempting.

Arcanum is Jean of Spain's other work under discussion. He continues the marriage metaphor, though in the usual terms of king wedding queen, with the king also representing the sun and the queen the moon. These are commonplace yet cosmic images. Jean can never consider a lab to be a mundane chemical process. In *Arcanum*, he is more interested in language than philosophy. Yes, alchemical writers often use secret, furtive language, with a dazzling display of mystifying symbols. Nothing is ever to be made easy for the adept. The lure of the alchemical tracts for poets becomes easy to understand. In the *Arcanum*, Jean almost seems to

be interested in language for its own sake. If a reader ponders long over the scintillating beauty of a passage, he has met the goal.

The *Arcanum* is also divided into numbered paragraphs, 128 of them. In paragraph 49, Jean makes direct quotations from opening *Genesis*, a technique he does not do in the *Summary*. He only touches on *Genesis* before passing on to other materials, but he never strays far from it. In paragraphs 73 and 74, he makes an extended comparison between the Philosopher's Stone and *Genesis*. We quote all of 73, where alchemy makes a strong entrance.

The generation of the Stone is made after the patterne of the Creation of the World; for it is necessary, that it have its Chaos and First matter, wherein the confused Elements do fluctuate, untill they be separated by the fiery Spirit; they being separated, the light Elements are carried upwards, and the heavie ones downwards: the light arising, darknesse retrais: the waters are gathered into one, and the dry land appeares. At length the two great Luminaries arise, and minerall virtues vegetable and animal, are produced in the Philosophers Earth.

Jean of Spain is a gifted writer when conveying process, things happening, cosmic events unfolding, nature at work. All of these processes can take place in the alembic. We will quote selections of his next paragraph, number 74. This language reinforces his commentary in the *Summary*, only this time including the Philosopher's Stone.

God created Adam of the Mud of the Earth, wherein were inherent the virtues of all the Elements, of the Earth and Water especially ... Into this Masse God inspired the breath of Life, and enlivened it with the

Sunne of the Holy Spirit. He gave Eve for the Wife to Adam, and blessing them he gave unto them a Precept and Faculty of multiplying. The Generation of the Philosophers Stone, is not unlike the Creation of Adam, for the Mud was made of a terestriall and ponderous Body dissolved by Water, wherein all the virtues and qualities of the Elements were placed.

Our reader can do his own analysis, but we cannot help but wonder how a fledgling adept could have applied this to the daily practicalities of his practice—and our answer is that was never what alchemical tracts were meant to be about. These tracts were meant to uplift, encourage, and inspire, and Jean accomplishes all that.

Each practicing alchemist kept his own private ledgers or notebooks, where all his endless chemical calculations were neatly written down. If alchemy was to merge into chemistry, this is where that transference took place. If the alchemist created his own code about intense practical matters—and many did—he was taking himself seriously. He might have written down something he did not yet know the value of. In his close, confined world, repetition was the key to all learning.

We conclude our chapter on Jean of Spain by quoting all of his long paragraph 58 in *Arcanum*. If our reader wishes a respectable exposure to the rich, mystic symbolism of alchemy, this passage will suffice.

Keep up and couple the Eagle and Lion well cleansed in their transparent cloister, the entry door being shut and watched, lest their breath go out, or the aire without do privily get in. The Eagle shall snap up and devoure the Lion in the copulation; afterwards being affected by a long sleep, and a

dropsie occasioned by a foule stomach, and shall be changed by a wonderfull metamorphosis into a cole-black Crow, which shall begin to fly with wings stretched out, and by its flight shall whisk downe water from the clouds, untill being often moistned, he put off his wings of his owne accord, and falling downe againe it be changed into a most white Swan. Those that are ignorant of the causes of things, may wonder what astonishment, when they consider that the World is nothing but a continuall Metamorphosis, they may marvel that the seeds of things perfectly digested should end in greatest whitenesse. Let the Philosopher imitate Nature in his work.

Chapter Thirty-seven:

Six Alchemical Treatises on the Philosopher's Stone

Scholars of Renaissance alchemy often rely on the contemporary small press as the source of original alchemical treatises. In the seventeenth century, Mr. Frederick Hockley put together a quarto manuscript containing five alchemical treatises. This is all we know about him, his small claim to fame. Three centuries pass, the year is 1991, and a small press located in Edmonds, Washington publishes an attractive edition of Hockley's collection. Our small press is called The Alchemical Press. They are specialists. They strongly suggest the anonymous author of one of Hockley's texts is Edward Kelly, best known for his long association with Elizabethan magus John Dee. Kelly's essay is by far the longest in the collection. The editors never compare this essay with other writings by Kelly. This author has never seen other writings by Kelly. Perhaps that is the editors' problem, though that leaves no explanation for why they selected Kelly.

Hockley collected treatises by George Starkey and Eirenaeus Philalethes. What Hockley could not have known was these two names were the same person. George Starkey was born in America, educated at Harvard when that was a new school, and

emigrated to England where he spent his second lifetime practicing alchemy. Often when he wrote about alchemy, he used the pen name Eirenaeus Philalethes. This fooled Hockley and it fooled our energetic editors at the Alchemical Press in 1991. The pen name was not convincingly proved till a few years later. Starkey hid his traces very well. In our discussions, we will refer to him as Starkey. The third writer in Hockley's quarto is George Ripley, better known for his fine poetry about alchemy.

The first treatise in the collection is by Starkey, titled, "The Secret of the Immortal Liquor called Alkahest or Ignis-Aqua." Starkey writes under his pen name. He uses the question and answer format, with two speakers. Ignis-Aqua is easily translated as fire water. Alkahest is another term for the philosopher's stone, though it is not especially used for healing or long life. Yet it is an alchemical product of tremendous powers; it can dissolve all things into their liquid mother, no form of matter can resist, and yet after the dissolving, all of the Alkahest remains intact. Starkey, like all alchemical writers, is painfully vague about how to make the Alkahest, but human blood and urine are required. He never mentions metals, precious or otherwise.

The reader is left with the frequent mystery of alchemical writings; however, did Starkey do it? All his rambling talk about blood and urine just does not get us there. Yet Hockley valued the treatise enough to lead off his collection. Possible reason? Hockley cherished the mystery. Maybe if he experimented enough with his own blood and urine, he could derive the magical salt that led to the Alkahest. Paracelsus worked wonders with salt. Why not he? Thus the endless lure of all cryptic alchemical writings. If I cannot reach the Alkahest, I can certainly enjoy the mystery.

The second entry is very short, more like a newspaper article than a treatise. The title is, "Aurum Potabile or the Receipt"

by Dr. Francis Anthonie: "His Way and Method: How he made and prepared the most Excellent Medicine for the Body of Man." It is a long title for such a short piece, but again the author is seeking the wondrous healing power of the philosopher's stone, this time called Aurum Potabile, or the Receipt for all the alchemist's hard work.

Frances Anthonie is always working hard. He requires a little gold to start his process. His Aurum Potabile will be drinkable gold, a useful way for the patient to take medicine. A little gold will be transformed into much more gold. In spite of all Antonie's specific, step by step instructions in his lab, he never explains how his alchemical methods can transmute a little gold into much more gold. Hence his treatise is one more alchemical writing steeped in mystery. Hockley was apparently probing for the secret to all these mysteries. Of course he never got there, but the effort enthralled him all the same.

The third treatise in Hockley's quarto is by George Starkey, writing under his own name, and titled, "Oil of Sulphur." The complete title is much longer, as is common of these treatises: "The Admiral Efficacy and Almost Incredible Virtue of the Oil Which is Made of Sulphur Vive Set On Fire and Commonly Called Oil of Sulphur." With such a long title, why write the treatise? Again this is a short alchemical treatise and the subject is the philosopher's stone, this time called the Oil of Sulphur. Hockley obviously knew what kind of treatises he liked.

Starkey makes little effort to explain how Oil of Sulphur is made. The reader is not to assume Starkey could make a full, detailed, workable explanation if he so desired. This is not what alchemists do. This is not how alchemists write. Starkey's Oil of Sulphur is made of the true oil—whatever that is—which is made

of sulphur vive and set on fire. We are no closer to understanding than at the first half of the previous sentence.

What Starkey concentrates on is explicating the wondrous powers of his philosopher's stone. He provides anecdotal evidence. This tale comes from Helmont, a major figure in alchemy and credence should thereby follow. John Moss was an ailing man at age fifty-eight. He took the Oil of Sulphur and made a complete recovery. Today, at the time of Starkey's writing, John Moss is ninety-nine, in excellent health for a man many years his junior and without the slightest reoccurrence of his previous illness.

If all this sounds miraculous, well so it is. Northing less should ever be said about the Oil of Sulphur. It is an excellent cure for toothache and far easier than putting oneself under the power of the crude, frightening tools of the barber surgeon. Oil of Sulphur makes all those trips to the barber surgeon unnecessary. It is also a faithful cause of pleasant breath. It is a preservative, a most useful trait in the long era before refrigeration. The Oil of Sulphur preserves meat, beer, wine, ale. If beer should turn bad, the Oil can return it to solid health. Starkey writes more about the Oil curing beer than people, but presumably it can do that too. He harshly criticizes apothecaries for selling false Oil of Sulphur, which will heal or preserve nothing. The false Oil could be tested on a vat of beer that has gone sour. Starkey himself died in 1665 after examining a plague victim. That old expression—physician, heal thyself—might apply here.

The fourth treatise in Hockley's quarto is by far the longest, longer than any three treatises combined. The author is unknown, but our fine small press editors have strong unknown reasons for believing he was Edward Kelly. We shall call him Kelly. We shall accept the editor's spelling of hi name. We need to call him something, and it is no great stretch to believe Kelly was deeply

interested in alchemy. He once had an ear clipped for false coinage, though this proves him a petty criminal rather than an adept. He writes on the same subject as our three previous writers, as evidenced by his title, "The Stone of the Philosophers: Embracing the First Matter, and the Dual Process for the Vegetable and Metallic Tinctures.

With a title like this, the reader should not expect Kelly's alchemical process to be easy. It is not. If the adept is fortunate enough to complete the entire, long-drawn-out process—and Kelly offers no guarantees—the time consumed on a day to day basis will be seven to nine months. Giving birth to the philosopher's stone is not unlike giving birth to a human child. The adept is required to develop two tinctures, one vegetable and the other mineral or metallic. The process of distilling the vegetable tincture in your alembic is to provide the necessary experience to distill the mineral essence, which is gold and thereby the Philosopher's Stone. Kelly will never make it easy on his followers.

The Stone requires soul, which is essential salt, as well as spirit, which is inflammable sulphur. These are not precise chemical terms. The reader has just started and he is lost. Kelly adds a new dimension, not uncommon among alchemists; the practitioner must be a genuinely spiritual person, with not a speck of lust or greed in his personality, who seeks the miraculous stone in his alembic only so he can help other people, so he can be a true healer. Without this firm, unwavering attitude, the adept will have no chance of accomplishing anything. The greedy alchemist spends a lifetime at infernal frustration. It is difficult to picture Kelly holding this strong spiritual side, but men do change. Let us quote from Kelly at the very point in his alchemical process when gold is created along with other metals.

But if it is sublimed leisurely through places which are hot and pure, where the fatness of sulphur adheres to it, this vapour, which the philosophers call their Mercury, is jointed to that fatness and becomes an unctuous matter which coming afterwards to other places, cleansed by the afore-named vapours, where the earth is subtle, pure, and moist, fills the pores of it, and so gold is made. But if the unctuous matter comes into places cold and impure, lead, or Saturn, is produced; if the earth be cold and pure, mixed with sulphur, the result is copper. Silver also is formed of this vapour, where it abounds in purity, but mixed with a lesser degree of sulphur and not sufficiently concocted. In tin, or Jupiter, as it is called, it abounds, but in less purity. In Mars, or iron, it is in a lesser proportion impure, and mixed with an adust sulphur.

Kelly has stated all this very simply, but much too simply to be of practical use to a practicing alchemist. If the Philosopher's Stone remains ever elusive, it might be because of the cryptic, overly simplistic ways the presumably successful alchemists write about it.

Kelly sidetracks in pondering why gold is sometimes found in the teeth of a dead man. He never considers a dental caretaker might have inserted the gold there. That is much too clear and logical for Kelly. Instead he stresses his firm belief that metallic mercury somehow enters the human body. He has no idea how this happens, but he is certain it does. At death this mercury rises up in the body, fastens to the teeth, and turns to gold. Kelly is quite satisfied with his solution. Always interested in gold, he had been deeply pondering the mysterious presence of gold in dead men's

teeth. He was troubled, baffled, confused, emotions that would be familiar to an alchemist. But now Kelly has his answer and his peace of mind returns. His half-crazy explanation sounds like the Edward Kelly who proved such a troublesome presence to John Dee. Alchemists often go out on a limb, but not quite this far.

Kelly believes in seeds. All parts of nature—animal, plant, mineral—have seeds. Otherwise nature would not experience growth. Never forget seeds. The seeds of tin let it mature to copper. The seeds of copper let it mature to silver or gold. The alchemist with his alembic and slow-burning furnace can speed up the process, though speed is a relative term. The alembic requires several long months, with even then no guarantee, while the metallic seeds maturing underground can take decades, hundreds of years, eons. When Kelly gives specific alchemical instructions, he expects them to be repeated over and over, a seemingly endless repetition process, seven to nine months. Let us quote Kelly on these matters.

And, indeed, the first principles of revealed religion are demonstrated from the whole process, for the seed of metals is sown in corruption, and raised in incorruption; it is sown a natural body, and raised a spiritual body; it is known to partake of the curse which came upon the earth for man's sake, having in its composition a deadly poison, which can only be separated in water and fire; it can, when it is thoroughly purified and exalted, immediately tinge imperfect metals and raise them to a state of perfection, being in this respect a lively emblem of that seed of the woman, the Serpent Bruiser, who, through His suffering and death, hath entered into glory, having thenceforth power and authority to

redeem, purify, all those who come onto Him as a mediator between God and mankind.

Kelly shows the highest expectations for the alchemist. The image of the Serpent Bruiser is taken from the Book of Revelations, where a woman clothed with the sun uses the power of her heel to stamp out the serpent. Common interpretations believe the Virgin Mary is the woman and she kills the same serpent who successfully tempted Eve in Eden. Hence Mary redeems Eden, woman redeems woman. If Kelly did not hold to this interpretation, his readers would have jumped on it. They would have seen several oil paintings of the Virgin Mary stomping out that wicked snake. If Eden can be redeemed, so can lead and copper, and these redeemed metals have a strong chance of turning to silver and gold. We have gotten a lot of mileage out of one image, but poets seek that effect, and at their best, alchemists could be poets.

A reader could not produce gold or the Philosopher's Stone from reading Kelly. Kelly has a very clear prose style, and yet this style camouflages how little solid content his language contains. He surely worked at an alembic, but he is extremely hesitant to share his glorious findings, assuming that he actually had any.

George Ripley, the poet, is the next author in Hockley's quarto. His title is, "The Bosom Book," which tells little. But like all previous authors, he is after the Philosopher's Stone, which he terms Medicine of the Third Degree. In plainer terms, Ripley has a Perfect White Stone which will transmute all metallic bodies, especially copper and iron, into silver and gold. Ripley's mention of iron is interesting. Iron is not one of the seven primary metals, but a later chemical development. Ripley might know more basic chemistry than most alchemists. He helpfully explains three alchemical symbols. The Green Lion is green gum, the Dragon is

faeces, often used in experiments, and Black Dragon is black faeces. Ripley probably should not be giving away trade secrets, but we are grateful

Ripley's math is a little shaky in the passage we next quote. He does confuse numerical proportions, as my readers shall quickly notice. But the passage shows the tremendous power that Ripley felt for alchemy. Otherwise he might not have felt it so worthwhile. Repetition is all.

And note how often in this work you dissolve and congeal your said medicine or stone, so many times doth he increase his virtue ten times in projection; so that if at the first one ounce will convert one hundred ounces, after the second solution the same shall convert one thousand, after the third ten thousand, after the fourth one hundred thousand, and after the fifth one million parts of any imperfect metal into pure and true gold and silver, in all examinations, as any of the natural mine.

Ripley never comes close to telling his reader how to get there. His Perfect White Stone must always remain out of reach. But the poet in him burst forth in the final paragraph of his treatise, which forms a musical coda for all that has gone before. His readers would be encouraged to keep trying. We quote:

This is the pleasant and dainty Garden of the Philosophers, which beareth the sweet smelling roses white and red, abbreviated out of all the Work of the Philosophers, containing in it nothing superfluous or diminished, teaching to make infinitely gold and silver according as the medicine was prepared, having virtue to heal and sicknesses, as well proceeding of cold as of hot causes, through

the subtlety of its nature, above all other medicines of physicians: fot it comforteth the healthy, strengtheneth the weak, and maketh the aged seem young, and drieth away all grief, and pulleth venom from the heart; it moisteneth the arteries and joints; it dissolveth all things in the lungs; it cleanseth the blood; it purgeth the pipes, and keepeth them clean; and if the sickness be of one month's continuance, it healeth it in one day, if of one year's continuance; it healeth it in twelve days, and if the grief be very old, it healeth it in one month. To conclude, whosoever hath this medicine, he hath an incomparable medicine above all treasures of the world. Praise God.

The sixth and final treatise of Hockley's quarto is again by George Starkey, though this time using his pen name. The treatise is very short, but the title is long, a common style among alchemists: "Preparations of the Sophic Mercury. Experiments for the Preparation of the Sophic Mercury, by Luna and the Antimonial Stellate Regulus of Mars, For the Philosopher's Stone." When we finally reach the end of the title, we learn the treatise is yet another Hockley alchemist seeking the Stone. This is clearly the lynchpin that holds all these alchemists together, including pen names and the possibility of a work by Edward Kelly. Hockley must have wanted to live forever or at least a very long time.

Starkey tries to find the Philosophical Stone in eighteen numbered steps. Steps 8 and 18 are worth quoting, and we shall. They are fine examples of the best of alchemical writing. We will not find the Stone but very interesting language. We now quote Step 8. Repetition is all.

8. I have found the best way of preparing the Sophic Mercury, viz., such as follows:

The amalgamated mass espoused or joined very intimately by a due marriage, I put into crucible, and into a furnace of sand for half-an-hour, but so that it may not sublime; then I put it again in a crucible, and in the furnace, and after a quarter of an hour, or thereabouts, I grind it again, and I make the mortar hot. By this means the amalgam begins to be clean, and to cast forth a great deal of powder. Then I put it in the crucible again, and to the fire as before, for a convenient time, so that it be not sublimed: otherwise the greater the fire is, the better it is; so continually putting it in the fire, and continually grinding it, till almost all the powder doth wholly disappear; then I wash it, and the faeces are easily cast out, and the amalgam becomes entire without any heterogeneity. Then I wash it with salt, and again heat it and grind it. This I repeat to the full, cleansing it from all manner of faeces.

Alchemy is not for the impatient. People in a big rush to get somewhere will not do well with alchemy. We close this chapter with Starkey's final section, his spiritual coda.

18. The Government of the Fire.

Then you must have a furnace built, in which you may keep an immortal fire; in it you shall make a heat of sand of the first degree, in which the dew of our compound may be elevated and circulated continually, day and night, without any intermission, etc. And in such a fire the body will die, and the spirit will be renewed; and at

length the soul will be glorified and united with a new immortal and incorruptible body.

Thus is made a new Heaven.

Chapter Thirty-eight:

Robert Fludd, the Magus Who Opposed Kepler

Robert Fludd was an English philosopher of remarkably wide-ranging interests. He was born in 1574, ten years after Shakespeare, and died in 1637, a quarter century after Shakespeare retired from the London theatre and returned to Stratford. Fludd never left behind evidence that he read or attended an Elizabethan play. Shakespeare's theatre was called the Globe; Fludd would have preferred a stage called the cosmos. Fludd had difficulty in dealing with mere earthbound happenings; if he could not soon connect events on earth with the Creator, or at least a revealing glimpse of the Creator, he could not maintain a sustained interest. He was a profoundly religious man, in all the finest senses of that term. He was devoutly Christian. He considered only two sources of knowledge were trustworthy; Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testament, and Nature, the glorious creation of God, extending from the most distant star to the smallest pebble at his feet. He was a physician who did not believe a healing took place without the intervention of God, almost always unnoticed but always there.

So far Robert Fludd does not sound too unconventional to modern thinking. Many physicians today place sincere faith in God

when going bout their work. Yet learning more about Fludd places him far from a sanitized, modern, empirical medical man and finds him with both feet grounded in Ficino's Florence. It is often overlooked that Ficino was a physician, so he could engage in physical healing. He was also a priest, so he had ordained powers to heal the soul. Fludd was a deeply committed Anglican, and believed human souls could handle their own problems without a priest. A cornerstone of the Reformation is that concept.

Fludd, in all his copious writings, shows little interest in disputes of religious doctrine, which he might have considered puffed-up pedantry. What mattered to him was natural philosophy, what we would today call science. Fludd wanted to investigate the entire cosmos, using a variety of writers, ancient and Renaissance, but always with Scripture as his guide.

What Fludd learned from Ficino was deep belief in the *Corpus Hermetica* and the classics of Neo-Platonism, Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Iamblichus. Fludd did not merely read these authors, he studied and pored long hours over them, till they had become part of him, till they were part of his being. Like so many Hermetists, Fludd believed the divine Egyptian magus either invented or strongly advocated alchemy. Fludd, in what would prove his typical fashion, took this a giant step further: alchemy merged with Scripture and Nature to become his basic personal theology. Ficino never went anywhere near this far, and might have found this statement alarming—and yes, it often seemed to be Fludd's mission in life to shake up or alarm people.

According to Fludd, the famous creation passage in Genesis One is alchemical with God the all-powerful adept who can separate and rejoin those cosmic substances with sublime strength and magnificence. As with so much in Fludd, this makes for fine reading as imaginative poetry, though not science. How

could Fludd possibly carry out an experiment to test it? But once such a spectacular, all-encompassing idea entered Fludd's head, he did not seek empirical proof—the thought would never have occurred to him. If he thought long about it and the idea sure felt right, then, sure, that's the way it had to be. He was scrupulously careful not to disagree with Scripture. But he was studying the other divine source of knowledge provided by God—Nature. If Fludd stuck fastly to this goal, he could hardly go wrong.

What makes Fludd so interesting and important is the large number of occult-magical factors he could bring together into his system, which took in the entire cosmos, with each part stuck neatly in its place. His works were often published in large folio volumes with large illustrations that somehow manage to convey the vast interconnected complexities of his system. More than one critic has found the illustrations far more interesting than the writing. Fludd deeply believed man is the microcosm of the divine powers in heaven. One illustration shows a circular cosmos, not surprisingly, with a naked man trapped inside it, vigorously pushing at its sides. Like Pico proclaimed, man is the great wonder. If the cosmos spins around, man will spin with it. The two are intricately, intimately united. This illustration foreshadows the muscled, trapped, surging men in Blake's engravings. With Blake's strong interest in occult lore, it is likely he studied Fludd, though we have no proof.

King James I was troubled by rumors of all this occult lore that Fludd was writing about. Fludd had also defended the Rosicrucians, a secret occult group on the continent. This group was so secret that historians today wonder if they ever existed; nobody knew who they were, where they were, or what exactly they stood for. Fludd quite naturally found the Rosicrucians quite appealing, and was promptly attacked in print by a natural

philosopher named A. Libarius in 1615. Fludd required a year to write a heated response to Libarius; Fludd emphasized he was not a Rosicrucian and had never known one—who had?—but they should be admired for their improvements in medical treatments and respect for classical authors. Fludd never mentioned what those treatments were—how could he know—but his position as physician gave some weight to his argument. There is no known response by Libarius.

In 1618, King James, an avowed enemy of superstition and witchcraft, sent for Fludd. The monarch had authored a short book denouncing the wicked horrors of witchcraft, and his interview with Fludd would not be easy for the natural philosopher. Fludd wisely brought several letters of recommendations from notable worthies about his excellence, and he explained the lasting value of genuine medicine. The monarch was impressed, and Fludd had a patron on the nation's highest chair, until James died in 1625.

Fludd would spend his life battling opponents over his ideas. Three times these would be monarchs of ideas: Michael Mersenne, Pierre Gassendi, and Johann Kepler, the latter a giant of scientific thought. Mersenne and Gassendi were also highly reputable scientists, whose methods would often find approval today, a biting statement that could seldom be said for Fludd. Yet these three figures chose to debate Fludd as a natural philosopher or rather to debate that he had the right to hold that title. That was the main argument of Mersenne and Gassendi, as the two Frenchmen insisted Fludd was a magus, that and only that. This remark would have severely bothered Ficino, for it left out his copious studies on Plato and his followers. Ficino would always want to be known as a Christian, as would Fludd. Fludd was insulted by the two Frenchmen because he strenuously believed his

personal philosophy held the keys to the entire cosmos. Key is a word that Fludd used, for he truly expected to unlock everything.

Fludd's battle of words with Kepler is far more interesting, because of the imposing stature of Kepler, whose three brilliant laws of planetary motion still hold today and strongly influenced Newton, and because all these years later Fludd and Kepler in rare moments do not seem all that different. But at bedrock level so different they were; Kepler dealt with quantitative mathematics after decades of exact heavenward observations to learn what was actually happening in our planetary system, while Fludd was a Pythagorean numerologist, a believer in the magical power of individual numbers, with all these number values being entirely arbitrary. Four forms a square and therefore holds the power of justice. Twenty-seven is three cubed, or the Trinity multiplied three times by itself, and such a power is truly awesome. This is numerology. This is what had Kepler tearing his hair out.

Fludd placed number systems on familiar geometrical forms, thereby enhancing the power of both number and shape. He revered the Pythagorean triangle with one at the peak and numbers two, four, eight evenly spaced down the left side, with numbers three, nine, twenty-seven spaced directly opposite the other three numbers on the right side. Though not a Hebrew scholar, Fludd had studied Kabbalah and understood the spiritual power of number-word relationships. These were connections, occult connections, like the Pythagorean triangle with the numbers equally spaced on opposite sides.

If this sounds too hopelessly mystical to be taken seriously, consider two facts: Kepler must have taken Fludd seriously to debate him, and Kepler had his own strong mystical strain that could often interfere with his brilliant empirical astronomy. Both Fludd and Kepler were fascinated with the five Platonic solids. A

cube is such a structure. It has four outward sides, all equal in shape. The cosmos has produced four other such solids, some with so many equal sides as to be useless for architecture or practical purpose. Neither Fludd nor Kepler saw it that way. These five solids had a spiritual message of how God operated in his cosmos—after all, what else could they mean? They were not curious geometrical oddities but cosmic building blocks. Fludd, not a mathematician, never took the concept farther, though he was fond of it.

Kepler, however, took it as far as it could possibly go. There had to be a reason God created five such solids instead of six or seven or some other number. God was the divine mathematician and could never leave anything to chance. Since Kepler was always staring up at the heavens at night, that was where he found his answer. He was twenty-four, and surely not lacking in confidence. The Platonic solids held a specific number and so did the planets. Hence there had to be a connection. But what? Kepler pondered, he paced, he calculated. What he decided was God had placed a Platonic solid between the orbit of each of the six planets. The sun and moon were not planets. The larger distances between planetary orbits required larger Platonic solids. If Kepler could do one thing, it was calculate. He made those five solids fit right where he felt they belonged and thereby felt he had glanced into the mind of God. He hurried to publish and waited for the grand acclamation which never came.

Kepler might have been discouraged, but he kept working, confidence undiminished. It is difficult to connect Kepler's theory of the solids with the three great planetary laws which bear his name. But this theory can be connected with Fludd's Pythagorean triangle, for both exist only in the human imagination. Granted, in this instance, Kepler's geometric fantasy is far grander and

challenging, but Fludd's imaginative powers are seldom left behind anyone, and this makes him worth our study—he might not have read poets but he surely influenced them—and an admirable if distant descendant of Ficino.

Fludd was an adamant opponent of Aristotle, and yet he could never quite get away from the ancient philosopher's habit of limiting the properties of the cosmos by a rigid system of classification. What this means, according to Aristotle, is all sublunary life is made of but four elements: earth, air, fire, water. Above the moon Aristotle found aether or the quintessence, a rarefied spiritual substance which could never exist below the moon. Hence for Aristotle the moon is the cutting off point. Aristotle's quintessence is just as imaginary as Kepler's theory of solids or Pythagoras' triangle with the special numbers; never a shred of tangible evidence will ever exist for these notions. This might not have troubled Fludd, who chose spiritual insight over tangible fact. His Bible contained more truth than all other books combined.

Fludd picked and chose in his discarding of Aristotle. If Aristotle had ever gotten anything correct, he learned it from Plato, who had of course learned it from Moses. Trismegistus had also attained his great knowledge from Moses. Fludd would concede neither Plato nor Trismegistus might have met Moses personally—travel was slow and difficult in those days—but both had tirelessly studied the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah, composed by Moses. Fludd would consider no other reason for the wisdom of Plato and Thrice-Great Hermes. Aristotle might have picked up a few crumbs, and these were the four elements. Fludd chose to keep them, but cast aside the quintessence as utter nonsense. If a rigorous scholar of Scripture or Plato is looking for a sustained strain of consistency or logic in all this, he will be left

wanting. As to Fludd, he would never have understood the problem. His cosmos was a vast alchemical work with innumerable occult connections, all mirroring connections within the Logos or mind of God, and any distraction from this overall concept must be forcefully set aside.

Fludd had his four elements and now he sought connections. The four elements had alternates among four qualities—hot, cold, wet, dry—and this can connect with the prevailing winds which blow from four directions and then connect with the four primary groups of angels who do battle with four groups of evil demons, and all this connects with the Platonic cube of God's eternal justice. On a good day, Fludd could probably add several other fours. He would not forget Galen's four humours linked to the four evangelists. His mind was long-trained to work this way. God was an occult geometer and Fludd's duty was to probe into the divine inner workings. So he remains a total oddity to Kepler's quantitative method and yet the two bold natural philosophers do hold impinging areas in common.

Above all, Fludd's God was an alchemist, who divided and brought together, tore apart, cemented together, the different major components of the cosmos. God's working terms could also be called distillation, rarefaction, calcinations, putrefaction. It only required Fludd's rich resources of imagination to link these two streams of language together, making of course more occult connections. Fludd could never tire of those. What the London alchemist performed in his fully-stocked laboratory imitated God's work in the cosmos, especially in those crucial days of opening Genesis. To make the philosopher's stone is to create the universe—this is microcosm-macrocosm carried to its farthest extent. To transmute copper into gold in an alchemical furnace is to bring forth the sun into the newborn sky.

Fludd believed the Spirit of God lived within the sun; he often mentions Psalm 18, verse 5, which refers to the sun as, “the tabernacle of God.” Fludd praises the sun’s glory in terms similar to Copernicus, and yet he persists in an earth-centered cosmos. How blessed we must be for God’s tabernacle to orbit around us. Fludd could seldom mention light without letting grateful thoughts of divinity enter.

Several of the Pre-Socratics considered the cosmos to be made entirely of one substance—all matter is fire, all matter are atoms, all is water. Fludd, relying heavily on opening Genesis, chose water. He maintains a Neo-Platonic hierarchy in his alchemical cosmos. He has the occult lore of all ages spread before him, and his life’s work is to put them together as best he can. Water dominates opening Genesis, and so water must dominate Fludd’s alchemical thinking. More than one kind of water is involved. When God separates the waters, these are not ordinary waters, nor do they hold the same chemical composition. The almighty alchemist would have it no other way. In between these waters is yet a third water, which divides the heavens from the earth. This is very delicate alchemical work—ultimate creation ultimately is—and Fludd’s thought has to be followed very carefully.

The lowest or third level of water makes up the composition of earth. Hence this water comprises Aristotle’s four elements and all the foursomes that follow forever after. A Pre-Socratic could neither have gone so far nor understood all Fludd was getting at. The Pre-Socratic would say: water is everything and that is all you ever need to know. Next question.

Fludd could never be so simple. In short, Fludd could never be simple. Fludd explains how straining water, a minor alchemical process, will result in salt, thereby proving earth is contained in

water. Salt is an all-purpose term for earth, and Fludd would not have considered performing precise measurements about this straining process. Boil water and of course you get air. Any school child knows that. Heat the air sufficiently and you get fire. This interchangeability of the four elements is not original with Fludd, but was required by alchemical theory since Aristotle had provided the notion during the revival of Aristotle's works in western Europe during the twelfth century. Fludd, of course, would have known that. Fludd was accused of many things, but never plagiarism. His startling originality is what makes him still a compelling figure.

Other Europeans had five millennia to ponder Aristotle's elements, but only Fludd moved back before the grand master to the Pre-Socratics and determined all those elements were made of water. The three kinds of water are his own invention. If Fludd had been there at opening Genesis, he would have expected God to perform step-by-step according to plan.

In "A Philosophical Key," Fludd provides an example of how he could roll up his sleeves, enter an alchemical laboratory, and perform the sacred art himself. Yet another side of Fludd appears. He is neither seeking to transmute base metals into gold nor to discover the philosopher's stone, the two primary goals of all alchemists. Rather Fludd is carefully inserting wheat into his alembic to learn the special powers that make wheat the most healthy and versatile of foods. Fludd gives precise steps of his alchemical operation, and a modern adept might possibly make something happen by carefully following Fludd's instructions. Of course Fludd cannot maintain this scientific position without comparing ordinary dinner-table bread to the Eucharist and our Savior that Eucharist represents.

If you were new in London and hopelessly lost, and thereby asked a stranger on a street corner for instructions, you would not want that stranger to be Fludd. He might tell you the shortest path to Mars and Jupiter, or which choir of angels would lift you highest, but you never would find 2684 Harley Street. You might wonder for a few minutes if you were still in London. Yet you would have found the odd stranger to be remarkably interesting and never regret talking to him.

We conclude with two contrary works by Fludd, which tell us not only about Fludd's divided nature but also about the age he lived in. Natural philosophers, and Fludd surely considered himself that, were caught with one foot in Renaissance magic and the other foot taking tentative steps in the new, quantitative, experimental science. Fludd did carry out a series of experiments with serious scientific intent, no angels or demons lurking nearby. He inserted an elongated glass tube with a rounded top in a small container. Most importantly, he wrote evenly-spaced numbers running up and down his glass tube. He inserted a lit candle into the container of water. Now he had his experimental apparatus all in place. What he was about to attempt is the counterside of alchemy. By increasing or decreasing the heat and cold both inside and outside his glass tube, he could measure exactly how the water inside rose or fell, and he could study how the candle-light flickered. All this experimenting did not lead to a useful scientific finding, but Fludd at last understood the correct procedures of how such findings were made.

Now contrast Fludd's glass-tube measuring with his assured belief in the weapon-salve, a strange occult concept a modern will have a hard time believing anyone could have trusted. The weapon-salve required healing a grievous wound from a distance. The victim could suffer the wound in battle, when a

heavy sword plunged into his shoulder, or a farming accident, when a misplaced swipe from a scythe made a dangerous cut in the foreleg. Common sense indicates the shoulder or the foreleg should receive primary treatment, but the weapon-salve method did not work that way. Yes, keep the wound clean and put a clean linen cloth on it each day; in the long era before Pasteur, few could comprehend how much this alone assisted healing.

Fludd did not think so. What mattered most was getting hold of the specific weapon or farming implement that had done the damage. This physical object must be at a significant distance from the wounded man, who must give samples of his blood to take to the harmful blade. Since the victim is often bleeding profusely, this would present no problem. Healing results, often quite quickly, when this blood is transported to the offending blade, and strange as it seems, the blade is anointed. Applying the victim's blood to the metal cause of that blood is the weapon-salve cure. Ointments and herbs can be mixed with that blood, but these extras are meaningless without the authentic victim's blood. What apparently happened is the clean linen staved off infection, bungling doctors were kept away, and the wound had a reasonable chance to heal.

Of course the weapon-salve is nonsense. The theory of sympathetic magic underlying it is extreme. Yet Kepler chose to debate the man who praised its wonders. Mersenne and Gassendi also had extended moments when they were forced to take Fludd seriously. He was the minor Ficino of his age, only that he lacked a school of followers, and he could look back on a century of great scientific achievements, while for Ficino the greatest western scientist was Archimedes. Fludd's era had obviously progressed since Archimedes, but a full understanding of the old Greek was essential to be prepared for the new scientific revolution about to

gather steam and not look backward. Fludd's problem is he was trapped in the wrong century. Occasionally a man would do decidedly better in the previous century. Fludd is the rare occasion of the thinker who needs to step back two centuries to feel fully confident and at home.

**THE INFLUENCE OF MARSILIO FICINO
(1433-1494)
ON ELIZABETHAN LITERATURE**

Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare

Volume II

Thomas O. Jones

With a Prologue by
Robert Levine

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To Judith and Nina

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	i
Prologue	iii
Introduction.....	v
Volume I	
Chapter One:	
Ancient Egypt Meets Renaissance Florence	3
Chapter Two:	
The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus	17
Chapter Three:	
The Hermetica.....	19
Chapter Four:	
Ficino and Plato's <i>Symposium</i>	91
Chapter Five:	
Ficino and Plato's <i>Phaedrus</i>	117
Chapter Six:	
Ficino's Major Astrology.....	121
Chapter Seven:	
Ficino's Minor Astrology.....	143
Chapter Eight:	
Book of the Sun.....	153
Chapter Nine:	
Ficino—Five Questions on the Mind.....	161

Chapter Ten:

- Ficino's Greatest Work: His Collected Letters 167

Chapter Eleven:

- Aratus, Astrologer From the Ancient World 223

Chapter Twelve:

- Lucretius, Ancient Poet of the Atom 231

Chapter Thirteen:

- Manilius, the Most Devoted of Ancient

- Astrologers 241

Chapter Fourteen:

- Pythagoras, First Magus of the Ancient World..... 249

Chapter Fifteen:

- Macrobius, the Ultimate Commentator..... 267

Chapter Sixteen:

- Plotinus, the Greatest Platonist Since Plato 279

Chapter Seventeen:

- Proclus, Philosopher of the Endless Sentences 287

Chapter Eighteen:

- Iamblichus, Master of Theurgy 299

Chapter Nineteen:

- The Angelic Hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius 305

Chapter Twenty:

- Boethius, the Philosopher of Lasting Values 313

Chapter Twenty-one:	
Julianus, the Unsung Mystic	327
Chapter Twenty-two:	
The Egyptian Hieroglyphics of Horapollo	337
Chapter Twenty-three:	
The Meaning of Words in Nicholas of Cusa.....	345
Chapter Twenty-four:	
The Wondrous Achievement of	
Pico della Mirandola	369
Chapter Twenty-five:	
The Many Sides of Cornelius Agrippa	379
Chapter Twenty-six:	
The Pathbreaking Life of Paracelsus	393
Chapter twenty-seven:	
William Adlington, Translator of	
Elizabethan Times.....	417
Chapter Twenty-eight:	
Thomas Norton, Poet Laureate of Alchemy	425
Chapter Twenty-nine:	
Jacob Boehme, the Shoemaker Turned Mystic.....	435
Chapter Thirty:	
John Dee, the Magus of Queen Elizabeth.....	447
Chapter Thirty-one:	
Giordano Bruno, Two Almost Forgotten Works	459

Chapter Thirty-two:

- The Extraordinary Life of Tomasso Campanella..... 469

Chapter Thirty-three:

- Arthur Dee, Jacobean Magus and
Son of John Dee 485

Chapter Thirty-four:

- Johann Reuchlin, the Far-reaching Influence
of His Kabbalah 493

Chapter Thirty-five:

- Basil Valentinè, Master Alchemist 503

Chapter Thirty-six:

- Jean of Spain, Master Alchemist..... 509

Chapter Thirty-seven:

- Six Alchemical Treatises on the Philosopher's
Stone..... 519

Chapter Thirty eight:

- Robert Fludd, the Magus Who Opposed Kepler..... 531

Volume II

Chapter Thirty-nine:

- Marlowe and Shakespeare's Narrative Poems 547

Chapter Forty:

- Marlowe's Minor Plays 557

Chapter Forty-one:

- Marlowe's Tamurlaine, Parts One and Two 595

Chapter Forty-two:

- Shakespeare's Earliest History—King John 623

Chapter Forty-three:

- Shakespeare's Early Gothic Melodramas—*Titus*

- Andronicus* and *Timon of Athens* 643

Chapter Forty-four:

- W. H. Auden Connects Ficino and Shakespeare 657

Chapter Forty-five:

- The Magic of Ancient Egypt—

- Antony and Cleopatra* 667

Chapter Forty-six:

- The Doomed Talkers—*Richard II*, *Faustus*

- and *Hamlet* 687

Chapter Forty-seven:

- The Villain of Villains—*Richard III* 725

Chapter Forty-eight:

The World's Greatest Love Story—

Romeo and Juliet 741

Chapter Forty-nine:

Magical Structures in Three Comedies 763

Chapter Fifty:

The Alchemy in Portia's Venice 775

Chapter Fifty-one:

Eloquent Monsters at Large—*Othello* and

Measure for Measure 789

Chapter Fifty-two:

The Making of a King—the Three Plays of

the Henriad 809

Chapter Fifty-three:

The Structure of the Cosmos—

Troilus and Cressida 829

Chapter Fifty-four:

King Lear 845

Chapter Fifty-five:

Two Roman History Plays—*Julius Caesar* and

Coriolanus 873

Chapter Fifty-six:

Magic in Comedy, Romance, and Tragedy 889

Chapter Fifty-seven:

Three Final Romances	911
----------------------------	-----

Chapter Fifty-eight:

Ben Jonson's Comic Masterpiece—	
---------------------------------	--

<i>The Alchemist</i>	925
----------------------------	-----

Chapter Fifty-nine:

Isaac Newton and the Emerald Tablet—Looking Forward	953
--	-----

Descriptive Bibliography:

Section One - The Ancient World.....	955
--------------------------------------	-----

Section Two -Ficino and His Age.....	965
--------------------------------------	-----

Section Three -Primary Texts of	
---------------------------------	--

Renaissance Magic.....	968
------------------------	-----

Section Four - Alchemy	975
------------------------------	-----

Section Five - Kabbalah.....	983
------------------------------	-----

Section Six - Medieval and Renaissance Magic	987
--	-----

Section Seven - Medieval and Renaissance	
--	--

History of Science	997
--------------------------	-----

Section Eight - Shakespeare and His Age.....	1015
--	------

Index.....	1031
------------	------



Volume II

Chapter Thirty-nine:

Marlowe and Shakespeare's Narrative Poems

Shakespeare was twenty-nine when the London Theatres closed in 1593 as a wise precaution against the spread of plague, always a terrifying threat during Shakespeare's two decades in London. With no theatre to write for, he composed two long narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. His magnificent gifts clearly showed in these two efforts, which were immediately popular and held a staying power that rewarded and satisfied the author. It is highly likely, in the late Elizabethan era, Shakespeare's hopes of achieving public status as a literary figure would be far more likely to come from these two narrative poems than his dramatic works. History has shown the powerful irony in this statement.

The narrative poems were published in attractive book form, sales were impressive and steady, and Henry Wriothesley, an aristocrat to whom Shakespeare dedicated both poems, was apparently highly pleased. The first dedication to *Venus and Adonis*, though lavish and glowing, is stiff and overly formal—it is not prose to outlast monuments. But the second dedication, to *The Rape of Lucrece*, shows the poet talking in dignified

familiar terms, almost to a friend, though a friend high above his station. Five years would pass before a play by William Shakespeare would appear in published or book form. By then he was an immensely popular London playwright—the unheralded young man from the rural provinces had done amazingly well—but his reputation as a literary author still held to those narrative poems, which we need to look at closely, with Ficino's methods staring over our shoulder.

Christopher Marlowe was also twenty-nine in 1593, and he was at work on a narrative poem in couplets titled, *Hero and Leander*. Marlowe divided his work into sestads, but he would only live to finish two. Plague would not kill him in 1593—Marlowe could not die so mundanely—but his sudden death resulted from a barroom brawl, when a large sword plunged through his neck or eye. Scholars differ on what body part, though their bickering seems pointless. *Hero and Leander* was brought to a conclusion by George Chapman, a fine Elizabethan poet, best known for his translations of Homer and for the excitement the young John Keats felt about these translations, as expressed in his famous sonnet, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” Chapman is most widely known through Keats, but he did write the final four sestads of *Hero and Leander*. Chapman’s sestads are well worth reading—Keats no doubt liked them—but our book’s subject is Marlowe and we will therefore concentrate on what Marlowe wrote.

Recall in Plato’s *Symposium* how Pausanias declares love exists in two Aphrodites, one goddess for the divine love of a person’s soul and thereby possibly those first steps up Diotima’s ladder, and a second goddess involved with earthy pleasures and appetites of the flesh. Shakespeare and Marlowe, whatever grand flights of romantic divinity they might have

taken as playwrights, look only to that second goddess in their narrative poems. Shakespeare's two poems, even when a goddess is a primary character in *Venus and Adonis*, are about physical passion, based entirely on what the admired figure looks like; this results in several sustained passages of wonderfully erotic description, but the pursuer's goal remains physical and thereby attainable without cosmic supernal powers. Aphrodite Two does not provide rewards of mystic transcendence or selfless appreciation of the admired. The pursuer would never consider these factors. In the midst of all the spectacular language, the carnal remains carnal.

A major difference involves the nature of desire's result in Shakespeare and Marlowe. In *Venus and Adonis*, the goddess Venus desires Adonis, who rejects all seductive talking and charms. But she will persist until the inevitable tragedy. Adonis, his concentration not at its best from all the goddess' talking, goes hunting and is killed by a boar. He is an experienced hunter, though not at all experienced in the ways of love. Shakespeare might have inserted some irony here amid the overflowing descriptive language.

We mentioned Venus talking. All three narrative poems under consideration are about rhetoric and description. Elizabethan readers thrived on brilliant description, a key reason for the poems' popularity, but the excessive rhetoric might have been new and different. These characters talk—in all three poems, they talk, argumentatively, logically, Aristotle standing below Juliet's balcony, forcefully, interminably. The persuader's goal is to wear down the opposition. If Adonis can listen long enough, no easy task, he will return Venus's passion. This must be Venus' plan. She might not be used to failing. She

makes Aphrodite One seem so much more worthwhile, appealing, lasting, satisfying.

These three poems work well because the main characters—each has two—talk so well, or excel in rhetoric. Even in long dramatic soliloquys, they are expert wordsmiths. Venus provides considerable annoyance to Adonis, but she is not a criminal. That can hardly be said for Tarquin in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Tarquin's horrid multi-layered guilt is somewhat similar to Macbeth, who hosts a king in order to kill him. Tarquin becomes a houseguest of host Collatinus so he can rape the latter's wife, who values her sacred sexual virtue more than life. Of course Tarquin cannot rape Lucrece, silently in dead of night, without considerable talking. The two forcefully debate her virtue, an issue which should never be under discussion, not in a civilized world. Plato's theories of evil do not apply to the wicked Tarquin. Plato felt evil-doers only lack education or understanding of their malfeasance, and hence a few good talks with Socrates would lead them to the side of virtue. Tarquin knows exactly how horrific his crime is, including the elements of betrayal and the lasting consequences. Lucrece is in deep trouble the moment Tarquin enters her room—the only question is if he can stop talking long enough to perform the rape, which does take place quickly.

Left alone, Lucrece employs a wondrous array of rhetoric in her tragic soliloquy, lines 764 to 1036, a long slow explosion of grief and anger. If Lucrece's solitary mind does not captivate the reader, the poem will come to a grinding halt. She rails at the Platonic Forms of Time and Opportunity. Each of her stanzas is filled with alive and original images, so the reader who is a friend to poetry will gladly read on. When morning light starts to filter into her room, Lucrece studies a wide, large,

extensive wall painting of the Trojan War. For two hundred lines, lines 1366 to 1568, she compares her situation to figures in the painting. She becomes a walking, elaborate, emblem-book.

After so much talking and description, Lucrece's suicide comes rather quickly. Her husband Collatinus and father Lucretius are startled, but the reader might not be too surprised. Moments before plunging the knife into herself, she talks about her soul's purity, even though her body has been horribly violated—in this one brief moment she reaches toward Aphrodite One. Tarquin's punishment is permanent banishment, which seems all too mild. His head is still on his shoulders and his coins are still in his pocket. This mild punishment might be Shakespeare's subtle indication of women's low place in Lucrece's society.

Marlowe's poem has a different structure, for Hero and Leander, the woman and man, are powerfully attracted to each other. This is reciprocal attraction, not seen among the protagonists in Shakespeare's poems. Nevertheless Hero is a virgin and needs to be persuaded. Unlike Adonis and especially poor Lucrece, Hero eventually wants to be persuaded, and this requires long stretches of truly dazzling rhetoric by Leander, who talks far better than any character in these three poems. We can only mourn Marlowe's vast literary potential if he had lived past thirty. We presume Hero might have surrendered her person sooner, expect she got such pleasure from listening. She does say, "Were I the saint he worships, I would hear him." This quiet outburst immediately follows Marlowe's immortal line, "Whoever lov'd, that lov'd not at first sight." This aptly describes Hero and Leander's initial reaction to each other, but this is a poem and Leander has the gift.

LEANDER

“Though neither gods nor men may thee deserve,
Yet for her sake, whom you have vow’d to serve,
Abandon fruitless cold virginity.
Then shall you most resemble Venus’ nun,
When Venus’ sweet rites are perform’d and done.
Flint-breasted Pallas joys in single life;
But Pallas and your mistress are at strife.
Love, Hero, then, and be not tyrannous;
But heal the heart that thou has wounded thus;
Nor stain thy youthful years with avarice:
Fair fools delight to be accounted nice.”

First Sestiad
lines 308-322

Hero, overwhelmed, can only respond, “Who taught thee rhetoric to deceive a maid?”

Marlowe’s gift is to infuse cosmic and mythic powers with his story. He interweaves these powers so often, so effortlessly, and so well-placed that they imperceptibly but solidly rub off on Hero and Leander—hence without declaring his intention, Marlowe creates his own subtle myth of supernal proportions. This remarkable achievement cannot be truly explained without examples. So we choose an extensive quote, which takes in different worlds with almost each change of line.

Herewith affrighted, Hero shrunk away,
And in her lukewarm place Leander lay;
Whose lively heat, like fire from heaven fet,
Would animate gross clay, and higher set
The drooping thoughts of base-declining souls,
Than dreary-Mars-carousing nectar bowls.
His hands he cast upon her like a snare;

She, overcome with shame and sallow fear,
Like chaste Diana when Actaeon spied her,
Being suddenly betray'd, div'd down to hide her;
And, as her silver body downward went,
With both her hands she made the bed a tent,
And in her own mind thought herself secure,
O'er cast with dim and darksome coverture.
And now she lets him whisper in her ear,
Flatter, entreat, promise, protest, and swear:
Yet ever, as he greedily assay'd
To touch those dainties, she the harpy play'd,
And every limb did, as a soldier stout,
Defend the fort, and keep the foeman out;
For though the rising ivory mount he scal'd,
Which is with azure circling lines empal'd.
Much like a globe (a globe may I term this,
By which Love sails to regions full of bliss,)
Yet there with Sisyphus he toil'd in vain,
Till gentle parley did the truce obtain.
Even as a bird, which in our hands we wring,
Forth plungeth, and oft flutters with her wing,
She trembling strove: this strife of Hers, like that
Which made the world, another world begat
Of unknown joy.

Sestiad Two

lines 268-298

This is not poetry for beginners. Marlowe never provides that. He can never be fully appreciated in bits and snippets.

Marlowe left us one short poem, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," six stanzas of rhyming couplets. This poem has become one of the most famous, most anthologized,

in English. Most people know the first line: “Come live with me and be my love.” Marlowe would not have had it any other way.

Shakespeare’s short poem, “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” involves Aphrodite One in eighteen short, compact stanzas. This poem requires several close re-readings, perhaps a cause why the brilliant poem lacks overwhelming popularity. Chaucer’s “Parlement of Foules” is an obvious influence. Shakespeare’s two birds, phoenix and turtle dove, become two as one, united spiritually in their sacred love. Yet their death must come, thereby combining joy and sadness with an intense joining of love’s basic vocabulary. Ficino would have liked this poem—it might have been what he was getting at all along.

Shakespeare has a minor poem, “A Lover’s Complaint,” that again is structured around rhetoric, with one speaker, an unnamed young woman, rejected in love, who suffers so horribly because she deeply experienced both Aphrodites. Her pain shows in her person so severely that an elderly gentleman approaches, expresses his sympathy for whatever troubles her, and asks her to talk. She does talk. Her short-term lover had both cosmic and human qualities, both of the highest order. We can close by quoting our nameless broken heart’s closing two stanzas.

Thus merely with the garment of a Grace
The naked and concealed fiend he covered,
That th’ unexpectant gave the tempter place,
Which, like a cherubin, above them hovered.
Who, young and simple, would not be so lovered?
Ay me, I fell, and yet do question make
What I should do again for such a sake.

“O, that infected moisture of his eye,
O, that false fire in his cheek so glowed,
O, that forced thunder from his heart did fly,
O, that sad breath his spongy lungs bestowed,
O, all that borrowed motion, seeming owed,
Would yet again betray the fore-betrayed,
And new pervert a reconciled maid.”

Chapter Forty:

Marlowe's Minor Plays

We will discuss Marlowe's four lesser-known plays in this chapter. If we were writing a volume of literary criticism with no special emphasis, each of these four plays would merit a chapter. However, our emphasis is on Ficino's thought, and these plays show this influence far less than the three Marlowe plays we have given considerable time: *De Faustus* and the two parts of *Tamburlaine*. Hence our giving less time to *The Jew of Malta* is not a critical or aesthetic judgement, but rather the decision of a literary historian working in that ever-difficult area of a cultural influence lasting over many generations. Hence we have four Marlowe plays seemingly crowded together in one chapter: *The Jew of Malta*, *Eduard the Second*, *The Massacre at Paris*, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. It is unlikely anyone but the Elizabethan specialist knows the existence of these latter three plays, though each is rich in great poetry and highly-wrought dramatic scenes. They deserve several careful readings. Yet they do not show the Florentine influence to the large extent as *Faustus* and *Tamburlaine*. Our text is the 1967 Everyman edition of Marlowe. This edition does not provide line numbers

for Marlowe's plays. So we direct the reader to the correct passage by the edition's page number.

We now find it useful in understanding the belief systems of a past age to turn to two revered scholars, E. M. W. Tillyard and F. M. Cornford. Both scholars say essentially the same thing. Tillyard required a short book, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, published 1947 by Knopf and frequently reproduced ever since in paperback editions for the college classroom. Cornford had his say in an essay, "The Unwritten Philosophy," which originally took the form of a lecture delivered at Oxford in 1935. Both scholars insist the overwhelming philosophy or belief system of an age, any age, is so all-pervasive, found in every nook and cranny, that the inhabitants take it for granted, having become so fully acclimated to their system that they feel no need to comment on it or employ it in their writing—it is just there, and scholars a few hundred years in the future are apt to overlook the whole thing, since they find little or no mention.

Cornford poses this theory and problem for his study of the ancient world, his vast area of renowned expertise. Tillyard applies the same thesis to Elizabethan England, with a brief five-page study of how Ficino, Macrobius, Plato, the Neo-Platonists worked their way into this all-encompassing, self-contained Elizabethan consciousness. Tillyard reflects on all these names to show how they led to the profound, if half unconscious, Elizabethan belief in hierarchy, called chain of being, and correspondences, which cannot get away from being occult. Tillyard insists these beliefs are as common to his subjects as the air they breathe. Hence authors feel no need to explain them, to clarify their meaning after putting them in a poem, or to provide a textual apparatus for what everybody

already understands. Move forward in time a few hundred years and a poem steeped in Neo-Platonism might appear quite baffling. Hence the contemporary scholar must step in and elucidate. This becomes the mission of Tillyard and Cornford, to illuminate belief systems that are never quite exactly stated.

One example should prove useful, looking at our contemporary world and then back to Cornford's ancient times. Today people believe time exists in an unending linear process, with the all-too-familiar concepts: past, present, future. A novelist would not need to explain that when he sets out to tell his story. Several religious faiths today believe time will eventually lead to an apocalyptic end and last judgement; their details vary, often greatly, but what does not vary, what is never questioned as this entire doomsday process is set in motion, is the undeniable, unalterable truth of linear time. Time moves forward in a steady, straightforward progression. The pace is the same, always the same; a day is always a day, an hour is always an hour. Neither novelists nor preachers need explain this nor even mention it. Linear time is so widely understood and agreed upon that it does not bear mentioning.

Our concept of time solidly fits the thesis that both Cornford and Tillyard are making. But look far back in Cornford's ancient world and linear time, as we so confidently know it, does not exist. What then? The ancients believed in endless cycles of time: after the stars and planets had traveled about in their circles a set number of times, history would cease, be suddenly brought to a halt, and start all over again. Not everything the next time around would be exactly the same—of course not, for it was the endless unpredictable variations that made life interesting—but definitely there would be a next time

and then a next time after that, an eternal cycle of times in an eternal earth and cosmos that would never end.

What could be more different than our own concept of linear time? What more fanciful? Unbelievable? Yet the believing was there, firm, strong, unquestioning, and it was all on the part of the ancients. What was so abundantly clear and obvious to them did not need to be written down. An ancient poet could tell a story, or his colleague the priest could compose a hymn, without ever thinking to mention life occurred in cycles. Why mention what everyone already knew? Why bore or distract the listener?

Yet a few ancient writers, perhaps many in a few places, must have written about cyclical time or wise, astute classical scholars like Cornford would not have picked up on it. By doing this, he can give higher and wiser insights into the literature he studies. He has effectively placed himself back in time as the only way of understanding that ancient world properly. Tillyard does the same with the Elizabethans, though he does not have to go back nearly so far and he does not have the several language barriers.

We admire and respect Tillyard, for his wide range of books over a generation of excellent scholarship and his short 1942 book is quite useful, especially in extending the Elizabethan age to Milton. But the complexities and depth of the Elizabethan's underground belief systems required Frances Yates and her innumerable works on Renaissance magic to be brought fully to light. What she added was the human's direct connection with the individual divine powers above.

This is occult striving at its most potent: my feet remain planted on earth, but my needs are dire and frantic, so if I lift my head and call out for help to a divine being far above, I

might soon be heard and assisted. This is an underlying Elizabethan belief that often is overlooked or underestimated for the sheer power it held over people, because creative writers work so freely with it that it often seems commonplace or exaggerated, or merely a chance for the poet to show off the richness of his poetry, again and again. It takes a scholar's retreat back to Elizabethan times, ably assisted by both Tillyard and Yates, to recognize the monumental hold this earth-heaven connection held on otherwise quite normal people. The microcosm-macrocosm thesis helps to explain, but does not account for the fervor and intensity of belief, which the troubled person can use for both prayer and cursing.

This connection is yet another Renaissance example of the power of words, the magic of words, the glorious sacred majesty of speaking. This was a great time to be a playwright in verse, and no one took better advantage than Marlowe. His characters usually plead skyward to pagan gods, and an undercurrent of comedy results that might only be picked up on by his contemporaries. We shall take some time to show how that might have worked. Marlowe especially fits the Cornford-Tillyard thesis in his four plays this chapter will discuss, not so much because our long distance from the Elizabethans can hide his meaning, but because it can hide his characters' power, fury, piety, resilience.

It is all too easy to read these four Marlowe plays as overly heightened melodrama. But this unfortunate interpretation vanishes when we recognize the utter sincerity of Marlowe's characters. Besides the poetry Marlowe gives his characters is far too great for his plays to be melodrama. Plays of passion might be the better term, where characters often reach down into the core of their being before exploding into verse with

what they find there. A modern playwright would never consider this, for people in our era simply do not behave this way and would feel highly uncomfortable watching others do so on stage. Marlowe meant to make us feel uncomfortable. He presents worlds of betrayal, mighty ambition, sustained violence, with no easy answers how these interconnected turmoils can be worked out. Often Marlowe employs the *Hamlet* solution: litter the stage with bodies and let life go on uncertainly from there.

The Jew of Malta has a prelude given by Machiavel, author of *The Prince*, well known for his belief that political power should be attained and held at whatever cost. Shakespeare occasionally uses the term Machiavel. Act One opens with Barabas, the Jew and protagonist, alone on stage “with heaps of gold before him.” Barabas provides an ironic twist to Machiavel; as a Jew, he could never hold political power, and so his devotion is to accumulate more and more wealth, “so inclose infinite riches in a little room.” His long opening soliloquy about wealth consuming all aspects of his character is reminiscent of the opening soliloquy of Shakespeare’s Richard III. Both men are up to no good. They are outcasts, Barabas by his race and Richard by his physical deformity. Throughout their plays, both will threaten the lives of anyone who comes near them. They are great poets—their tragedy is they fall so far beneath being great men.

Barabas maintains pride in both his race and wealth. He is familiar with the Hebrew Testament, as he shows throughout. Still in Act One, he gives his second long speech—he is a prolific talker—combining wealth and religion. He reinforces cruel stereotypes about Jews, which would not turn lethally

dangerous for several centuries. For now the cruelty is turned on him, the perpetual outcast, without hope or chance to remedy.

BARABAS

Thus trolls our fortune in by land and sea,
And thus are we an every side enrich'd:
These are the blessings promis'd to the Jews,
And herein was old Abraham's happiness:
What more may heaven do for earthly man
Than thus to pour out plenty in their laps,
Ripping the bowels of the earth for them,
Making the sea the serpents, and the winds
To drive their substance with successful blasts?
Who hateth me but for my happiness?
Or who is honour'd now but for his wealth?
Rather had I, a Jew, be hated thus,
Than pitied in a Christian poverty;
For I can see no fruits in all their faith,
But malice, falsehood, and excessive pride,
Which methinks fits not their profession.
Haply some hapless man hath conscience,
And for his conscience lives in beggary.

The Jew of Malta

Act One

Everyman edition: 1967

page 165

This speech might be the high point of Barabas' life in the play. Before he can catch his breath, the Turkish emperor, fierce enemy of Malta where Barabas lives, demands immediate payment of ten years' fees that have accumulated. Marlowe never gives a number, but we are led to believe that Christians of Malta owe the Turks a whopping sum, impossible to pay on

their own. The plot thickens: the Christians have military might and the Jews of Malta have vast sums of money. Problem solved. The Christians rob the Jews at gunpoint, thereby offsetting the Turkish threat. Barabas, having lost all his fortune, can curse the cosmic terms.

BARABAS

Ay, policy! that's their profession,
And not simplicity, as they suggest. —
The plagues of Egypt, and the curse of heaven,
Earth's barrenness, and all men's hatred,
Inflict upon them, thou great Primus Motor!
And here upon my knees, striking the earth,
I ban their souls to everlasting pains,
And extreme tortures of the fiery deep,
That thus have dealt with me in my distress!

The Jew of Malta

Act One

Everyman edition: 1967

page 171

Like Shakespeare's Shylock, Barabas has a daughter named Abigail. Both these famed literary Jews love their daughters on a somewhat equal footing with their wealth. Barabas talks in cosmic language about his great loss to Abigail. He has been turned out of his house, so Christian nuns can made a convent there,

BARABAS

My gold, my gold, and all my wealth is gone! —
You partial heavens, have I deserv'd this plague?
What, will you thus oppose me, luckless stars,
To make me desperate in my poverty?

And, knowing me impatient in distress,
Think me so mad as I will hang myself,
That I may vanish o'er the earth in air,
And leave no memory that e'er I was?
No, I will live; nor loathe I this my life:
And, since you leave me in the ocean thus
To sink or swim, and put me to my shifts,
I'll rouse my senses, and awake myself.—
Daughter, I have it: thou perceiv'st the plight
Wherein these Christians have oppressed me:
Be rul'd by me, for in extremity
We ought to make bar of no policy.

The Jew of Malta

Act One

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 173-174

This is a key passage for Barabas. He has been beaten down hard, immeasurably hard, but he will not surrender. He wills to fight. "No, I will live; nor loathe this my life." A respectable portion of his wealth—Barabas never uses paper currency—remains hidden in the house he has been brutally turned out of. Abigail listens closely to the subtle workings of her father's mind. The trick is to get back into that house, and Barabas has the most unexpected of answers.

The irreverent Marlowe will now be getting slight ripples of laughter from his Protestant audience. Yes, Barabas has a plan, a very good plan. Abigail will become a nun and join the convent inside her old family house. That part completed, she rescues the family gold and jewels from beneath certain floorboards, bags them up, and returns them to her father, with no one in the new convent possibly suspecting Abigail—more

the fool they, for she was a Jew only a day ago—the plan should go off without a hitch.

Not surprisingly, Barabas gets the best speeches in the play. His plot takes place when Act Two commences, with Barabas entering a dark stage holding a light. Of course he starts talking immediately.

BARABAS

Thus, like the sad presaging raven, that tolls
The sick man's passport in her hollow beak,
And in the shadow of the silent night
Doth shake contagion from her sable wings,
Vex'd and tormented runs poor Barabas
With fatal curses towards these Christians.

The uncertain pleasures of the swift-footed time
Have ta'en their flight, and left me in despair;
And of my former riches rests no more
But bare remembrance; like a soldier's scar,
That has no further comfort for his maim. —
O Thou, that with a fiery pillar ledd'st
The sons of Israel through the dismal shades,
Light Abraham's offspring; and direct the hand
Of Abigail this night! or let the day
Turn to eternal darkness after this! —
No sleep can fasten on my distemper'd thoughts,
Till I have answer of my Abigail.

The Jew of Malta

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 177-178

Barabas is standing outside with his candle. This becomes one of the play's better dramatic scenes. Abigail, now a nun, appears on a top floor of the new convent. She has the goods:

“where I have found/The gold, the pearls, and jewels, which he hid.”

Barabas has not yet seen Abigail, though the audience does. He speaks briefly of the supernatural, using common superstitions associated with wealth. These few lines would not merit quoting if he was not such a good poet.

BARABAS

Now I remember those old women's words,
Who in my wealth would tell me winter's tales,
And speak of spirits and ghosts that glide by night
About the place where treasure hath been hid:
And now methinks that I am one of those;
For, whilst I live, here lives my soul's sole hope,
And, when I die, here shall my spirit walk.

The Jew of Malta

Act Two

Everyman edition: 1967

page 178

Abigail soon makes contact with her father, and throws the bags of treasure down to him. It is not likely that Barabas dropped any. He is once again a well-to-do man and no doubt a major puzzlement to Malta's authorities.

These authorities have not yet paid the huge tribute to the Turks, though they safely hold the richness in their possession after robbing the Jews. The Turks had granted Malta's leaders a month to come up with that money—without that month, the plot of Marlowe's play would be so much different. During that month, Malta's governor Ferneze has stiffened his backbone, inspired by a vice-admiral of Spain. Selim Calymath, son of the Turkish emperor, is the spokesman

for his father. When the month has passed, Calymath is back at Malta expecting his money, and instead finds war. Ferneze has all the money, plenty of that, but prefers the magisterial dignity of armed rebellion. He does not consult his people, an idea that would never occur to him. His people are under siege to a deadly foe, and curiously it will be Barabas who rescues them, not at all his intention.

It is common to compare Barabas with Shakespeare's Shylock. Both are Jews with a fondness for wealth, a lovely daughter, the only child, and a ferocious hatred towards Christians. This hatred is sadly explained by how badly Christians treat them, especially in Marlowe's play. Shylock is only active once in his desire to destroy a single Christian; this occurs in the infamous contract he signs with Antonio, where the latter will be required by law to give a pound of his human flesh if he cannot repay a debt to Shylock by a certain date. At Antonio's trial, Shylock is tricked, out-foxed, and humiliated, and he shall never again cause problems. Barabas is a far more dangerous, truly lethal character. When he learns two Christian men hold strong romantic feelings for his daughter, he tricks the two men into a duel by sword, an event neither wanted, and yet both die. Barabas is very pleased, no doubt rubbing his hands in glee on the stage.

But his daughter Abigail truly loved one of the dead men, and she shows her outrage towards her father by entering the convent a second time, this time in all sincerity to be both a Christian and nun. Barabas cannot forgive her. In his entire life Barabas has probably never forgiven anyone for anything. He learns the nuns' entire evening meal is a large pot of rice pudding, and he effectively poisons the pot, so each nun dies, including his daughter. He again rubs his hands in satisfaction.

He is well pleased. Shylock's daughter Jessica fled him to marry a Christian. Shylock grieved and raged, but he would never have considered murdering her. His only violent exertion is against Antonio, while Barabas throughout his long life has acted wickedly against so many people. In Act Two, Marlowe lets Barabas tell his autobiography, and he appears as Tamburlaine on a smaller scale.

BARABAS

As for myself, I walk abroad o' nights,
And kill sick people groaning under walls:
Sometimes I go about and poison wells;
And now and then, to cherish Christian thieves,
I am content to lose some of my crowns,
That I may, walking in my gallery,
See 'em go pinion'd along by my door.
Being young, I studied physic, and began
To practise first upon the Italian;
There I enrich'd the priests with burials,
And, after that, was I an engineer,
And in the wars 'twixt France and Germany,
Under the pretence of helping Charles the Fifth
Slew friend and enemy with my stratagems:
Then, after that, was I an usurer,
And with extorting, cozening, forfeiting,
And tricks belonging unto brokerage,
I fill'd the gaols with bankrupts in a year,
And with young orphans planted hospitals;
And every moon made some or other mad,
And now and then one hang himself for grief,
Pinning upon his breast a long great scroll
How I with interest tormented him.

But mark how I am blest for plaguing them; —
I have as much coin as will buy the town.
But tell me now, how hast thou spent thy time?

The Jew of Malta

Act Two

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 185-186

Barabas does all this talking to Ithamore, his Moslem slave, who also hates Christians and has a long history of hurting them whenever he can. Barabas and Ithamore become like friends, then brothers. When Barabas dies, he might only have his slave to mourn him.

The final scene requires elaborate sets, perhaps unusual for an Elizabethan play, and this essay is about language. Two large buildings are required, though only one is required on stage. But both would be nice, convincing, entertaining. Barabas does not like Turks any more than he likes Christians. During a pause in the warfare between his two opponents, he plots to murder the Turks by a spectacular dinner invitation. The Turkish leaders will be served in one building, with the floor fixed to drop them suddenly to their deaths. The Turkish soldiers enter a much larger building—presumably one such soldier would represent a hundred or some such ratio—and this building is mined with explosives, set to go off all at once and leave no survivors.

Marlowe's audience will be eager to see how all this turns out. Ferneze, the governor of Malta, would like to get rid of both Barabas and the Turks. Ferneze's son was one of the duelists stabbed to death over love for Barabas' daughter, a duel which Ferneze realizes was carefully and falsely instigated by Barabas. So when Barabas steps inside the first building to greet

the mighty Turk visitors, Ferneze cuts the cord and the huge boom drops, killing Barabas and the Turkish leaders. Moments later the other building is blown to smithereens, with all hands lost. Perhaps this could be done offstage by colorful sound—effectively but the audience would like to see a building shattered. Calymath, the Turkish leader, is allowed to live, so he may suffer by witnessing so much suffering. The gods have been kind to no one. Ferneze stands triumphant amid a broken city of ash and rubble.

Edward the Second is Marlowe's one historical play, employing the genre that Shakespeare would so successfully master. Homo-erotic love is a main theme of Marlowe's play. Apparently Marlowe was not troubled by the subject, for he handled it openly, blatantly, with full force. Not even the Shakespeare of the sonnets can be said to have done that. Act One opens with Gaveston on stage telling his story, setting the plot that shall roar on till a violent conclusion. Yet life is peaceful, almost tranquil, as Gaveston talks. An English king has recently died, a king who detested Gaveston, especially the latter's romantic friendship with his son the prince, who forbade any contact between the prince and Gaveston, and finally resorted to driving Gaveston out of the country, no doubt scampering like a scared jack-rabbit, to France.

Now all is changed. The angry old king has died, mercifully so, and the prince is King Edward the Second. As king, he can see whom he wants, when he wants, and he promptly sends for Gaveston, his one true love. Gaveston's opening lines of the play, quoting the beloved new king, get this strong plot element started, "My father is disceas'd. Come, Gaveston, / And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend." Gaveston does not have to be asked twice. His joy is so

infectious and his fancy so brimming that he creates an Italian masque out of thin air. He is an excellent poet and this quote shows him at his best.

GAVESTON

I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits,
Musicians, that with touching of a string
May draw the pliant king which way I please:
Music and poetry is his delight;
Therefore I'll have Italian masks by night,
Sweet speeches, comedies, and pleasing shows;
And in the day, when we shall walk abroad,
Like sylvan nymphs my pages shall be clad;
My men, like satyrs grazing on the lawns,
Shall with their goat-feet dance an antic hay;
Sometimes a lovely boy in Dian's shape,
With hair that gilds the water as it glides,
Crownets of pearl about his naked arms,
And in his sportful hands an olive-tree,
To hide those parts which men delight to see,
Shall bathe him in a spring; and there, hard by,
One like Actaeon, peeping through the grove,
Shall by the angry goddess be transform'd,
And running in the likeness of an hart,
By yelping hounds pull'd down, shall seem to dive:
Such things as these best please his majesty. —
Here comes my lord and king, and the nobles,
From the parliament. I'll stand aside.

Edward the Second

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 226-227

The myth he imagines is sexual, for his whole personality is sexual. He is brimming with excitement and anticipation. He cannot conceive anything that could possibly go wrong. If he is not a complete fool, he is close.

NOTE: Marlowe did not divide *Edward the Second* into acts and scenes, but rather set down his words in one continuous flow, or rather that is how the text has come down to us today.

King Edward's romantic reception at court of Gaveston sets off a flurry of conflicts. What the two bliss-stricken lovers overlook, to their own hazard, is Queen Isabella, the king's faithful and loving wife. Her dignified feelings are shattered by all the homo-erotic goings-on. If King Edward had used a little discretion, but this is not his way. This is a very long history play and we are only just getting started. England's noblemen *en masse* are vigorously opposed to Gaveston. The newcomer's public behavior to the monarch is wildly inappropriate and he spends court money at a wreckless rate. Gaveston soon becomes a one-man budgetary problem. The king is adamant that Gaveston shall remain at court and behave however he desires.

The noblemen seek help wherever they can find it. England was a Catholic country when this play takes place, as was all western Europe. The nobles persuade the pope to denounce Gaveston's behavior, and this puts King Edward in a hammerlock. Gaveston either leaves the country or Edward abdicates his crown. Gaveston loses, though if he had a thinking head on his shoulders it is hard for him to imagine a different outcome.

Queen Isabella has at last had her prayers answered. She typifies the Marlowe character with a strong personal connection with the divine, expressed in pagan imagery and yet conveying a deep spirituality. We are mistaken to overlook this

and regard Isabella as a worshipper of stones and sticks. If not her husband, an Elizabethan would have been moved by her pious outpouring.

QUEEN ISABELLA

O miserable and distressed queen!
Would, when I left sweet France, and was embarked,
That charming Circe, walking on the waves,
Has chang'd my shape! or at the marriage-day
The cup of Hymen has been full of poison!
Or with those arms, that twin'd about my neck,
I had been stifled, and not liv'd to see
The king my lord thus to abandon me!
Like frantic Juno, will I fill the earth
With ghastly murmur of my sighs and cries;
For never doted Jove on Ganymede
Such much as he on cursed Gaveston:
But that will more exasperate his wrath;
I must entreat him, I must speak him fair,
And be a means to call home Gaveston;
And yet he'll ever dote on Gaveston
And so am I for ever miserable.

Edward the Second

Everyman edition: 1967
page 237

Gaveston has been sent to Ireland, and young Mortimer, who will in time become the queen's lover, tells Isabella this news, with an interesting insight into the torpedo. Marlowe most likely never saw a torpedo, but got his information from Pliny or a magical handbook. He would use those sources again in this play.

YOUNG MORTIMER

Fair queen, forbear to angle for the fish
Which, being caught, strikes him that takes it dead;
I mean that vile torpedo, Gaveston,
That now, I hope, floats on the Irish seas.

Edward the Second

Everyman edition: 1967

page 238

But Gaveston is still trouble, and plays both ends against the middle. While in exile, he writes loving letters to the king's niece. Edward never learns this, and Marlowe does not fully develop this romance at a distance, though Gaveston's sincerity must stand in heavy doubt. He does write passionate letters. Ultimately the nobles cannot trust Gaveston while he still walks this earth. They plan to bring him back from Ireland so they can put him to death. That should permanently solve their problem. The niece learns of Gaveston's return in one of his romantic letters.

Speeches for and against Gaveston are temporarily balanced against each other. The result is a debate with several characters. Marlowe shows his use of natural science for metaphors, but he relies as much on Pliny's copious volumes of magical wonders as on facts found in nature. Moderns might find this combination of real and fantastic to be unnerving, but the Elizabethans would have swallowed it whole. Even if they had not read Pliny, they would have greatly respected the name. This striking difference in Elizabethan thinking to our own is what Cornford and Tillyard are talking about.

To set the scene, King Edward is excited about the eminent return of Gaveston, with no thought his queen is standing nearby. Young Mortimer informs Edward that an army

of France has invaded Normandy, an English possession. But Edward is far too obsessed with Gaveston to care. "A trifle! We'll expel him when we please." Edward expects a "stately triumph" for his beloved's return, but he will be disappointed. Young Mortimer responds, "A homely one, my lord, not worth the telling." But Edward persists, "Pray thee, let me know it." Now the debate in imagery begins in full force, with:

YOUNG MORTIMER

But, seeing you are so desirous, thus it is;
A lofty cedar tree, fair flourishing,
On whose top branches kingly eagles perch,
And by the bark a canker creeps me up,
And gets unto the highest bough of all;
The motto, AEque tandem

Edward the Second

Everyman edition: 1967
page 246

King Edward does not pause to analyse or reflect on what he has just heard—the Latin phrase threatens the uniting of two—but quickly presses Lancaster for his explication. Young Mortimer has delivered subtle omens, and Lancaster will increase the subtletry, though with the same intent.

LANCASTER

My lord, mine's more obscure than Mortimer's.
Pliny reports, there is a flying-fish
Which all the other fishes deadly hate,
And therefore, being pursu'd, it takes the air:
No sooner is it up, but there's a fowl
That seizeth it: this fish, my lord, I bear;
The motto this, Unique morsest.

Edward the Second
Everyman edition: 1967
page 246

The Latin is prophetic of unwelcome death. The immediate response is made by Kent, the king's brother. Kent rages at the two poets of political omens. Then the queen offers a rather surprising line under the circumstances, "Sweet husband, be content; they all love you." Now King Edward takes his turn. He returns the attack, using the same strain of imagery that has assaulted him. Perhaps the line from his wife has given him strength, or more likely he stands unaware that she is even there. Marlowe's actors are given choices and this would be one.

KING EDWARD

They love me not that hate my Gaveston.
I am that cedar; shake me not too much;
And you the eagles; soar ye ne'er so high,
I have the jesses that will pull you down;
And AEque tandem shall that cander cry
Unto the proudest peer of Britainy.
Thou that compar'st him to a flying fish.
And threaten'st death whether he rise or fall,
'Tis not the hugest monster of the sea,
Nor foulest harpy, that shall swallow him.

Edward the Second
Everyman edition: 1967
pages 246-247

Young Mortimer mutters about the king's overreaction to Gaveston's impending return, "If in his absence thus he favours him, / What will he do whence he shall be present?" Lancaster responds, "That we shall see."

Gaveston has entered the stage. He and Edward have learned nothing, for they at once give out rapturous speeches of deep affection for each other, all this for their private closet, and yet proclaimed with the queen and nobles listening. If Gaveston's doom was not already sealed, he and his foolish king have added another nail to the coffin. A few lines later, Lancaster will draw his sword and threaten to stab Gaveston. Young Mortimer, so very fond of the queen who has been so very hurt, draws his sword and stabs Gaveston. The wound is not fatal and Gaveston is carried offstage. He will live to die another day.

The blow to the king's authority has been fatal. Kent desperately worms his brother to change his entire attitude about Gaveston, but the king adamantly refuses, not realizing how very little support he has. The drama heightens. The nobles capture Gaveston, who realizes they intend to execute him. This is Gaveston's one all-too-brief moment of recognizing reality. King Edward, realizing the overwhelming power of the nobles, begs for one last visit with his beloved before sentence is carried out. This is a weak king acting out of pathetic weakness. Request denied. Gaveston is beheaded. Edward is helpless politically, but he can still talk. He kneels to pray, but rage overcomes him and he returns to his feet. An actor could do much with this passage. What matters is Gaveston, not the kingdom.

KING EDWARD (kneeling)

By earth, the common mother of us all,
By heaven, and all the moving orbs thereof,
By this right hand, and by my father's sword,
And all the honours 'longing to my crown,
I will have heads and lives for him as many

As I have manors, castles, towns, and towers! —

(Rises)

Treacherous Warwick! traitorous Mortimer!

If I be England's king, in lakes of gore

Your headless trunks, your bodies will I trail,

That you may drink your fill, and quaff in blood,

And stain my royal standard with the same,

That so my bloody colours may suggest

Remembrance of revenge immortally

On your accursed traitorous progeny,

You villains that have slain my Gaveston! —

Edward the Second

Everyman edition: 1967

page 262

A brief skirmish takes place between the forces of king and noblemen, and the king fares poorly. This violence on stage is brief, for Marlowe makes it happen with a one-time stage direction. Eventually the king is captured. The nobles are not content merely to execute him—he has caused far too much trouble for that—but intend to inflict as much cruel physical pain and humiliation as Edward can possibly stand. He proves a far stronger, tougher character than his enemies expected, living for days, wide awake, standing in cesspool water up to his lower legs, in darkness, in a dungeon. He can still curse back at his jailors. He can still be resilient. He is reminiscent of Shakespeare's Richard II, who concentrates on weaving fine strands of ever longer poetry when his crown is lost. Finally a professional murderer is called in, who crudely suffocates the exhausted king between a bed and heavy table. This form might be original with Marlowe, and curiously interesting to stage. The murderer is promptly put away by the jailors.

But Edward shall be revenged from beyond the grave. He leaves behind a young boy who is promptly crowned Edward the Third. Isabella will still be queen, or so she supposes, and her lover Young Mortimer will be Lord Protector. In effect, the boy king will be powerless, today, tomorrow, for many years. However, the new king does not see it that way. He quickly learns to command. He gives orders and people do things, and this mightily pleases him. Edward the Third is a bright lad, he realizes how horribly his beloved father was treated, and who holds the primary guilt. Comedy arises from what follows. The boy king orders the immediate execution of Young Mortimer, who sure never saw this coming, and the imprisonment of his mother Isabella, equally surprised and flabbergasted, who finds her little boy will no longer obey her and she will do well to keep her head on her shoulders. The audience will applaud as the two conspirators are led away. The audience will feel a little drained and exhausted as it walks home after such a long, unwieldy play made forever interesting by great sustained outbursts of magnificent verse.

The Massacre at Paris is Marlowe's least known play. Like his historical play about King Edward, the *Massacre* is not divided into acts and scenes, and so we shall identify our quote by page numbers in the Everyman edition of Marlowe's Complete Works. Unlike Edward, the *Massacre* is a short play, with several action scenes, and could be performed rather quickly. The *Massacre* is built around the Catholic-Protestant controversy in late sixteenth-century Paris. No heroes shine forth in this story, only victims.

Guise, the wild-eyed anti-Protestant, is the primary instigator of the single night of horrific violence against his opponents. Marlowe brilliantly portrays this night by short,

swift scenes of individual violence, which add up to the near unbelievable cruelty the Protestants suffer. Guise's actions will not be a surprise to the audience. Near the play's opening, he introduces himself and his intention in a monumentally long soliloquy of seventy-six lines. One might be reminded of Richard III's opening soliloquy in Shakespeare's history play, except Guise talks so much longer and Richard is the far better poet.

Guise makes his first entrance soon after a royal Catholic-Protestant marriage takes place. He is infuriated, often his manner. He means to take action. He talks like a man fully connected to cosmic entities.

GUISE

If ever Hymen lour'd at marriage-rites,
And had his altars deck'd with dusky lights;
If ever sun stain'd heaven with blood, clouds,
And made it look with terror on the world;
If ever day were turn'd to ugly night,
And night made semblance of the hue of hell;
This day, this hour, this fatal night,
Shall fully show the fury of them all —

The Massacre at Paris

Everyman edition: 1967

page 297

Guise has good reason to require an apothecary, for the old Queen of Navarre is stubbornly Protestant and he intends to murder her by poisoning her gloves. His scheme works, and the old Queen dies painfully from a source she never could have anticipated. Moments later a Lutheran admiral is shot and killed from a distance, also at Guise's instigation. He will leave no

stone unturned when it comes to maiming and killing Protestants.

We can return now to his long soliloquy, which stresses his ever expanding hopes, confidence, and bravado in stamping out Protestants. He sees himself as a knight on a cosmic plane. Evil he might be, but he is another instance of a distant mind-set Cornford and Tillyard talk about. As far-fetched as Guise's ever mounting imagery might sound today, the Elizabethans would have swallowed it whole, though of course being good, virtuous people. This leads to the point of Marlowe taunting his audience, almost all Protestants under their most Protestant queen, by placing an arch-Catholic villain before them. The audience could participate, taunting right back at Guise, especially when he speaks at great length. Marlowe's theatre has become a spectator sport. This is all surmise, working within the Cornford-Tillyard structure, but not totally improbable. Let us quote a sizeable chunk of Guise's long opening soliloquy to see what all the excitement is about.

GUISE

Now, Guise, begin those deep-engender'd thoughts
To burst abroad those never-dying flames
Which cannot be extinguished but by blood.
Oft have I levell'd, and at last have learn'd
That peril is the chiefest way to happiness,
And resolution honour's fairest aim.
What glory is there in a common good,
That hangs for every peasant to achieve?
That like I best, that flies beyond my reach.
Set me to scale the high Pyramides,
And thereon set the diadem of France;
I'll either rend it with my nails to naught,

Or mount the top with my aspiring wings,
Although my downfall be the deepest hell.
For this I wake, when others think I sleep;
For this I wait, that scorn attendance else;
For this, my quenchless thirst, whereon I build,
Hath often pleaded kindred to the king;
For this, this head, this heart, this hand, and sword,
Contrives, imagines, and fully executes,
Matters of import aimed at by many,
Yet understood by none;
For this, hath heaven engender'd me of earth;
For this, this earth sustains my body's weight,
And with this weight I'll counterpoise a crown,
Or with seditions weary all the world;
For this, from Spain the stately Catholics
Send Indian gold to coin me French ecues;
For this, have I a largess from the Pope,
A pension, and a dispensation too;
And by that privilege to work upon,
My policy hath fram'd religion.
Religion! O Diabole!

The Massacre at Paris

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 297-298

We have quoted less than Guise's entire soliloquy, delivered while he held the poison that will kill the old queen. He will slay Protestants on earth so he can pile up his own rewards in heaven. He dominates his play as much as Tamburlaine does his. The difference is Guise functions but in one city, while Tamburlaine roams and conquers continents. Tamburlaine's belief system is all-for-Tamburlaine, while Guise's driving belief is all for the Catholic God. Marlowe does not create

fence-straddlers. Rather he creates monarchs of towering anger who would burn every fence in sight.

Guise has a wife who is unfaithful, and so her lover Mugerown is stabbed to death. Guise paid to have this done. He only acts personally in religious matters. Finally Guise has murdered too many, caused too much trouble, and so in this instance alone, Protestants and Catholics agree he must be done away with. Three murderers are required to carry out the job, and still Guise dies talking. Guise's two brothers, the Duke Dumaine and the Cardinal of Lorraine, are also murdered. Even with these three brothers dead, the violence on stage continues. King Henry is stabbed by a friar, and in return stabs the friar to death. King Henry dies a slow lingering death, which gives him ample time to talk about religion and politics. He is not a great talker—no need to quote—but dying kings must talk, in Marlowe and Shakespeare. One would think this would be the time they bow their heads and pray, but no, the magisterial rhetoric must continue to the final breath.

The *Massacre* has much in common with a Hollywood movie about gangland Chicago during prohibition. Rival gangs violently fight it out for ever larger plots of turf. In Marlowe, these gangs are called Catholics and Protestants. In Marlowe, the mafia kingpin who never gets his hands dirty is Guise.

Dido, Queen of Carthage is Marlowe's final play, and by far his finest play of those discussed in this chapter. Our text conveniently divides the play into five acts, the standard number for Elizabethan theatre, and we can more professionally identify the location of quotations than giving page numbers from a text that not everybody will have. Like the *Massacre*, *Dido* is a short play, and could move swiftly with the exception of one, tremendously long, descriptive passage, several hundred

lines in Act Two, when Aeneas describes the entire history of the Trojan war to a spellbound Dido, who is fascinated to learn the truth of this famous event. Aeneas, after all, was there. He provides a play within the play.

Marlowe must have assumed or hoped his theatre audience would share Dido's compelling interest. She liked Aeneas. He could talk all day as far as she is concerned. Most audience members would know the sad tale of Troy, probably having learned it from childhood. What Marlowe accomplishes is a fine narrative poem, brilliant in many parts, and he hoped this would please an audience with a strong interest in splendid rhetoric. Aeneas does achieve that, or the actor with the prodigious memory, and we are back to forcing ourselves to read as true Elizabethans, as Cornford and Tillyard would require.

The play opens with a rare, sustained comic scene in Marlowe. The scene is the distant heavens, where Ganymede frolics on Jupiter's knee. Obviously the planetary system is left to its own devices for a while. Hermes sleeps. Jupiter offers his human darling the cosmos, and young Ganymede seems quite willing to accept. Jupiter pulls a feather from Hermes but she sleeps on, perhaps wisely so. The king of gods next gives jewels to Ganymede, who wants more, much more—"And then I'll hug with you an hundred times." Jupiter, seeking a laugh line, responds by quoting Marlowe's famous short poem, "And thou shalt have Ganymede, if thou wilt be thy lover."

Before these two lovebirds can continue, Venus, the goddess of love, enters. She pays them no mind, which would amuse the audience. Her concern is Aeneas, floundering in his ships with his men at sea from ferocious winds by Boreas. Juno, wife of Jupiter, has motivated Boreas. Of course she will in time

be furiously jealous of her husband and his Trojan boy Ganymede, and Venus, protectress of Aeneas, will be outraged at her. These gods are a troublesome lot. Conflicts in heaven mirror conflicts on earth, though the gods have a great deal more time to get their acts in order, an eternity really, and the comedy is they are never quite able to do so.

Venus calms the seas, and Aeneas and his crew are saved. Achates, second in command, praises Aeneas rather than Venus. Aeneas has become the god. In this play, that might not be a high compliment, but Achates is a fine poet and has his say.

ACHATES

Brave prince of Troy, thou only art our god,
That by thy virtues free'st us from annoy,
And mak'st our hopes survive to coming joys:
Do thou but smile, and cloudy heaven will clear,
Whose night and day descendeth from thy brows.
Though we be now in extreme misery,
And rest the map of weather-beaten woe,
Yet shall the aged sun shed forth his hair,
To make us live unto our former heat,
And every beast the forest doth send forth
Bequeath her young ones to our scant food.

Dido, Queen of Carthage

Act One

Everyman edition: 1967

page 334

Left alone on the beach, Aeneas encounters Venus, dressed as a hunter. He is respectful. He call her “fair virgin” and speaks in her praise. He is a superb poet, but fails to recognize her till she leaves. He will recall Venus rescued him

from the flames of Troy in his long retelling. He is respectful, but not overly so. He rather likes being called a god himself.

Comedy returns in the third act. Cupid, another god, disguises as Ascanius, the son of Aeneas. This plot gets Cupid close to Dido, so he can propel her to fall in love with Aeneas. She might not have needed too much encouragement. But Dido is still every inch a queen, at least for now, and she wants Aeneas to realize what a find she is. So she lists her former lovers, and by chance Aeneas' men have known them all. A comic pattern forms: Dido mentions a man's name, and one of Aeneas' men calls out how he knew the fellow. Dido's past romances have taken in a wide-sweeping arc. Aeneas listens to all this and responds with what might be a comic one-liner, "o, happy shall he be whom Dido loves." Dido gives him the resounding positive response he desires. It all happens so very quickly. Recall Marlowe originated the famous line about no one ever loving who did not do so at first sight.

Juno and Venus have an extended scrap in Act Three. Juno finds Ascanius asleep. He is the son of Aeneas, the sworn enemy of Juno. She might have done him harm—she surely has the power—but she prattles too long over the young body. This gives Venus, the sworn protectress of Aeneas, time to arrive and prevent harm. While Ascanius continues to sleep, wisely so, the two goddesses heatedly debate his fate, mingled with the fate of Troy and several historic heavenly episodes. The goddesses are not great poets. The scene can only work if the two deities can bring out the ludicrous comedy in their situation. They control the stars, but they cannot control each other. They cannot control themselves.

Another superb poet appears at the close of Act Three in Iarbas, the long-time passionate admirer of Dido. He is a

frustrated, furious man. Just when he felt he finally had his big chance, Aeneas arrives, seemingly out of nowhere, and all is lost. Marlowe nicely adds another plot complication. Dido has a sister named Anna who deeply loves Iarbas, whose lifetime romantic problem would be solved in return. But Iarbas never knows Anna is alive; in many ways, he is his own worst enemy, though he does speak well. We look in on a near opening section of hot bemoaning soliloquy

IARBAS

O love! O hate! O cruel women's hearts,
That imitate the moon in every change,
And, like the planets, ever love to range!
What shall I do, thus wronged with disdain?
Revenge me on Aeneas or on her?
On her! fond man, that were to war 'gainst heaven,
And with one shaft provoke ten thousand darts.
This Trojan's end will reconcile thee to content,
And make love drunken with thy sweet desire.
But Dido, that now holdeh him so dear,
Will die with very tidings of his death:
But time will discontinue her content,
And mould her mind unto new fancy's shapes.

Dido, Queen of Carthage

Act III

Everyman edition: 1967

page 354

The ferocious storm causes Iarbas more problems, for it drives Dido and Aeneas alone into a close, secluded, romantic cave together. Obviously these two are making the most of their no-holds-barred passion for each other. Iarbas does not require a large cranium to deduce this when the storm finally ceases and

the lovers exit the cave. As Act Four commences Iarbas might be unlucky in love, not to mention foolhardy, but he has become the play's best poet. He attempts to make a sacrificial prayer to Jove. This becomes another Cornford-Tillyard example where the reader must retreat on solid grounding into a past belief system.

IARBAS (to sacrifice)

Eternal Jove, great master of the clouds,
Father of gladness and all frolic thoughts,
That with thy gloomy hand corrects the heaven,
When airy creatures war amongst themselves;
Hear, hear, O, hear Iarbas' plaining prayers,
Whose hideous echoes make the Welkin howl,
And all the woods Elissa to resound!

The woman that thou will's us entertain,
Where, straying in our borders up and down,
She crav'd a hide of ground to build a town,
With whom we did divide both laws and land,
And all the fruits that plenty else sends forth,
Scorning our loves and royal marriage-rites,
Yields up her beauty to a stranger's bed;
Who, having wrought her shame, is straitway fled:
Now, if thou be'st a pitying god of power,
On whom ruth and compassion ever waits,
Redress these wrongs, and warn him to his ships,
That now afflicts me with his flattering eyes.

Dido, Queen of Carthage

Act IV

Everyman edition: 1964

pages 357-358

The poet laureate becomes Dido in the play's final two acts. A dream from the gods—where else?—tells Aeneas he must depart Dido and her kingdom in Carthage, so he can found yet another kingdom in Rome. This play is rather free with kingdoms. The audience knows from the play's start that Aeneas will be setting off to found Rome, but this is big sudden news to Dido. Our queen has been hit by the proverbial ton of bricks. She reacts as a Marlowe heroine can be expected to react: with a series of extended lamentations that often transform into complex interweavings of great poetry. We cannot quote all these passages, especially not to readers who will soon be checking this play out of their local library. She and Iarbas are the best poets. They should have got on well together. But Marlowe is writing tragedy. His audience expects tragedy and violent tragedy it shall have.

Dido shows her eloquence while staring straight at Aeneas and contemplating the gods, who in this play are not the most likely sources of help.

DIDO

O keep them still, and let me gaze my fill!
Now looks Aeneas like immortal Jove:
O where is Ganymede, to hold his cup,
And Mercury, to fly for what he calls?
Ten Thousand Cupids hover in the air,
And fan it in Aeneas' lovely face!
O that the clouds were here wherein thou fled'st,
That thou and I unseen might sport ourselves!
Heaven, envious of our joys, is waxen pale;

And when we whisper, the stars fall down,
To be partakers of our honey talk.

Dido, Queen of Carthage

Act Four

Everyman edition: 1967

page 361

In response, Aeneas can also find the glowing words his love wants to hear. The Fourth Act concludes with the issue of Aeneas' departure still unresolved, at least to Dido, and her voice from now on shall be the only one that conveys sincerity, thereby the only one that counts.

Act Five depicts Dido slowly but surely losing her grip on reality, which means gradually losing her powers to convince Aeneas to stay. It is no wonder these scenes have inspired opera composers. Marlowe holds his own inspiration. He is never better than revealing Dido's frantic desperation in several long outcries.

DIDO

I'll frame me wings of wax, like Icarus,
And, o'er his ships, will soar unto the sun,
That they may melt, and I fall in his arms;
Or else I'll make a prayer unto the waves,
That I may swim to him, like Triton's niece.
O Anna, fetch Arion's harp,
That I may tice a dolphin to the shore,
And ride upon his back unto my love!
Look, sister, look! lovely Aeneas' ships!
See, see, the billows heave 'em up to heaven,
And now down fall the keels into the deep!
O sister, sister, take away the rocks!
They'll break his ships. O Proteus, Neptune, Jove,

Save, save Aeneas, Dido's lifest love!
Now is he come on shore, safe without hurt:
But, see, Achates wills him put to sea,
And all the merry-make for joy;
But he, remembering me, shrinks back again:
See, where he comes! Welcome, welcome, my love!

Dido, Queen of Carthage

Act Five

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 371-372

Her sister Anna realizes the queen is taking leave of her senses,
“Ah, sister, leave these idle fantasies! / Sweet sister, cease;
these idle fantasies!”

But Dido cannot be calmed or chastened. She builds a sacrificial fire without explaining exactly why, though she will be burning relics of the lost Aeneas. Marlowe provides her one, last great speech while the fire is lit and burns.

DIDO

Now, Dido, with these relics burn thyself,
And make Aeneas famous through the world
For perjury and slaughter of a queen.
Here lies the sword that in the darksome cave
He drew, and swore by, to be true to me;
Thou shalt burn first; thy crime is worse than his.
Here lies the garment which I cloth'd him in
When first he came on shore: perish thou too.
These letters, lines, and perjur'd papers, all
Shall burn to cinders in this precious flame.
And now, ye gods, that guide the starry frame,
And order all things at your high dispose,
Grant, though the traitors land in Italy,

They may be still tormented with unrest;
And from mine ashes let a conqueror rise,
That may revenge this treason to a queen,
By ploughing up his countries with the sword!
Betwixt this land and that be never league;
Litora litoribus contraria, fluctibus undas
Imprecor, armo armis; pungent ipsique nepotes!
Live, false Aeneas! truest Dido dies;
Sic, sic juvat ire sub umbras.
(Throws herself into the flames.)

Dido, Queen of Carthage

Act Five

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 372-373

Dido's final lines are in Latin, a cruel irony, for Aeneas departs to found the empire that will speak Latin. Dido's Latin is an obvious anachronism, and these are her final words. She hurls herself onto the sacrificial flames and dies. The broken-hearted Iarbas watches his beloved's suicide and stabs himself to death. Anna watches her beloved's suicide by stabbing, grabs a knife, and kills herself by the same cruel ending. The play ends rather quietly, with a pyre and two bleeding corpses. The gods have failed miserably. Ganymede might still hold his armful of jewelry but he is the only human brought to a successful ending within the confines of this play. Achates might not be wrong to call Aeneas a god, for the leader can deceive and betray just like those higher powers.

Chapter Forty-one:

Marlowe's Tamburlaine, Parts One and Two

A young Christopher Marlowe exploded onto the London theatre scene with a stirring, often bombastic, often brilliant, always original tragedy called *Tamburlaine*. The year was 1587, and Marlowe was an astonishing twenty-three. It should be little wonder he was promptly considered the boy wonder of English letters. No Englishman that young would write so well again till Keats, and that was two centuries later. Marlowe soon followed his initial success with *Tamburlaine, Part Two*. He could write swiftly, with a blind fury of inspiration, and if part two was not completed in 1587, it was on the boards soon after.

Marlowe and Shakespeare were both born in 1564. In 1587, Shakespeare was slowly, perhaps hesitantly, making his way from Stratford to London, to see what the big city might offer. Marlowe would die in that tragic, mysterious barroom brawl in 1593, the year the London theatres were closed from fear of plague. Shakespeare was still not a major literary figure—a crude cynic might ask whatever was he waiting for? —but he spent the time well, composing his two, long narrative

poems and his first dramatic masterpiece, *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare would from then on feel frustration about Marlowe; he genuinely liked the man and greatly admired his talent, he had learned much from Marlowe's plays, but he felt persistent frustration at competing with Marlowe's magnificent ghost till the start of the seventeenth century.

We require the basic historic facts about Marlowe's protagonist. His name means Timor the Lame, so we can assume this grand figure walked with a limp or some other pedal difficulty. This handicap never occurs in Marlowe. Tamburlaine did have a pedigree of terror which curiously Marlowe never mentions. The great tyrant is the great-great-grandson of Genghiz Khan, the overwhelming Mongol conqueror. If the historic Tamburlaine meant to compete with Genghiz, he did well. He conquered huge sections of Russia, Persia, India, and central Asia, and died while preparing to invade China.

Marlowe's protagonist is brutally ambitious, but not this much. He never mentions China and his brutal feats in India are not large. Marlowe, the playwright, has him conquering cities rather than continents. This is Marlowe's strategy or plan. If his Tamburlaine conquers enough cities, the continents shall fall into place. He takes no prisoners. He spares neither women nor children. He is an ego-crazed madman with virtuoso gifts for language, as do all Marlowe's characters—obviously Marlowe speaks through all of them. If all these characters did not talk so well, especially in lengthy speeches, we would not find them so interesting. Marlowe's pattern is magnificent language, horrifying inhuman atrocities, more great language. He clearly had Elizabethans sitting on the edge of their seats.

Other writers found this same Tamburlaine a subject of interest. In 1702 Nicholas Rowe composed a play, *Tamburlaine*, with striking differences to Marlowe. Rowe used his protagonist to compliment the English monarch, William of Orange. Hence this Tamburlaine maintains control over his emotions at all times, and tries to be the philosopher-king Plato had talked about all so long ago. In 1827, Edgar Allan Poe titled a collection of poems, *Tamburlaine and Other Poems*. These were poems of his youth. The title page said, "published by a Bostonian." Poe did not sell many copies—his verse would greatly improve over the years—but his Tamburlaine engaged him in learning to develop his later major theses: love, beauty, death and pride. We can be assured both Rowe and Poe read Marlowe. Every literary figure in the English language read Marlowe.

In explaining the great, lasting popularity of Marlowe's Tamburlaine plays in Elizabethan times, we find it useful to leap forward a huge stretch in time to two motion pictures directed by David Lean, another Britisher. The films are *Laurence of Arabia* and *Dr. Zhivago*, both multiple Oscar winners. Though Laurence is set in vast sections of North African deserts and Zhivago covers similar territory of Russian snow, both films have much in common with each other and with Marlowe's Tamburlaine plays. Both David Lean films are about war, prolonged traumatic social upheavals, lovers at a loss to remain together in such turbulent times, families in minor wars with each other, vast scenic landscapes with seemingly countless thousands of fighting men. David Lean uses all his cinematic art, and doubtlessly several villages of extras, to bring all this to the screen, an extra-wide screen. Lean is rightly admired for his ever-widening pan shorts that take in ever increasing spans of monumental geography, often a merciless

geography, those endless stretches of desert, the freezing snowbound steppes that captures all winter. Lean deserves all the awards and recognitions he has received, and these two efforts have a lasting place in film history.

Our point is Marlowe accomplishes nearly all of these spectacular effects with language. He cannot have tens of thousands of soldiers, often a great deal more, tromping about an Elizabethan stage, so he lets his characters provide sometimes lengthy, sometimes quite brief, descriptions of massive forces preparing or engaged in battle. If he wants to change location, he uses the same technique; he lets his characters spout out place names one after the other, and thereby keeps his drama from ever standing still long in one place. David Lean did it differently, but not better.

A note is necessary about a Marlowe character rattling off a long list of place names. Elizabethans liked placed names. They had just discovered maps, which they liked to collect and study. They would compare three maps of Russia, each showing a slightly different shape, and try to determine which one is accurate. Maps were a modest craze and Marlowe's characters fed into this. Of course the main impetus were the brave seafaring explorers, crossing seemingly impossible oceans where no white European had gone before. The printers made adjustments to print map after map at low cost and still turn a nifty profit.

David Lean is primarily a visual artist, while Marlowe is verbal. Both have a wide scope and all-encompassing vision that competitors could not compete with. Shakespeare might soon prove a far greater dramatist than Marlowe, but he did not practice the panoramic David Lean techniques.

The closest Shakespeare comes is *Antony and Cleopatra*, a masterpiece of the highest order, and yet no lover of maps would feel satisfied from the sudden change of scenes; we never know whether it is sunny or cloudy in Egypt or Rome, and we have no precise information about the size or strategies of armies, though mention is made that Antony's men fight better on land. Shakespeare's play is about two late middle-aged lovers who keep fighting off politics and war, rather like an annoyingly sticky tar baby, in their futile, last-ditch effort to enjoy a private happiness together. They avoid blood and thunder—Antony makes a cowardly flight from a sea-battle—while Tamburlaine revels in it, for the monstrous conqueror knows no other way. The lasting influence of Ficino's Neo-Platonism and astrology also reached Marlowe, though no doubt passing through many hands before getting there. All main characters in the Tamburlaine plays, including the tirelessly talkative conqueror himself, frequently connect their lives or fortunes below on earth with the heavens above. Specific gods and goddesses are often mentioned and connected to earthly characters. Dame Fortune is frequently at work, as is the microcosm-macrocosm belief system, so well-known to Elizabethans.

Amid this overlapping of ever flexible occult networks, we find Marlowe's remarkable overuse of the word heaven. If he had a typewriter, we might suspect one specific key typed heaven. In his first play on Tamburlaine, he uses heaven thirty-seven times. Back for more, in play number two, he used heaven an even fifty times. Was he aware? Did it have some special meaning to him? An arcade above an Elizabethan theatre might be decorated with stars and half moons on a blue background and thereby be meant to represent heaven, but even if so, this is not an adequate answer. Marlowe wanted his

audience to look at his characters and imagine the thousands of troops they described, and not be staring high above the stage—they might as well be nodding off or sipping from flasks within their jackets. Of course the audience would not be counting words like this author but using heaven fifty times in one play would be noticed.

We start our specific analysis of the first Tamburlaine with the opening scene, where the conqueror's enemies, filled with fear and trembling, talk about the cosmic portents at his birth.

COSROE

Now to be rul'd and govern'd by a man
At whose birthday Cynthia with Saturn join'd,
And Jove, the Sun, and Mercury denied
To shed their influence in his fickle brain!
Now Turks and Tartars shake their swords at thee,
Meaning to mangle all thy provinces.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part One

Act One, Scene One

Everyman edition: 1967

page 2

In the second scene, Tamburlaine tries to court, by excessive bullying, the lovely Zenocrate, daughter of Soldan, monarch of Egypt. She properly resists, but Tamburlaine never takes no from man or woman. He tries to impress her by his famous birth, “the possession of the Persian crown, / Which gracious stars have promised at my birth.” These stars are gods, pagan gods, and Tamburlaine never ceases to link himself to them.

Zenocrate now stands silently on stage, sadly the captive woman's place, and hears more exalted rhetoric about her

suitors cosmic capacities. Theridamas enters. He is a Persian, and his very entrance joins him with Tamburlaine and sordidly betrays his people. What motivates him? Partly he wants to be on the winning side, and thereby keep his head on his shoulders, and partly he believes the supernal capacities of his new leader. He is impressed Tamburlaine rose from being a Scythian shepherd to commanding mighty armies; apparently those stars at his birth knew what they were about. No mention is made of Genghiz Khan, for this would take away from the all-impressive rags to riches legend. Theridamas has all these factors in mind when he first addresses the legend.

THERIDAMAS

Tamburlaine!
A Scythian shepherd so embellished
With nature's pride and richest furniture!
His looks do menace heaven and are the gods;
His fiery eyes are fix'd upon the earth,
As if he now devis'd some stratagem,
Or meant to pierce Avernus' darksome vaults
To pull the triple-headed dog from hell.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part One

Act One, Scene Two

Everyman edition: 1967

page 10

Tamburlaine likes what he hears—what conqueror would not?—and promptly accepts the traitor into his camp. Zenocrate is till on stage silently listening. She has just witnessed the most horrid, self-serving betrayal. She is above all a daughter of Egypt. If she ever so reluctantly accepts Tamberlaine's romantic advances, she can also consider herself a traitor. What actually does she believe about Tamburlaine's

cosmic powers? The play never tells us. But after hearing Theridamas, the flatterer, bend his knee in listing but a few of those powers, she next hears Tamburlaine orate for forty-five lines about his unique supernal gifts. She might not believe herself—we never know—but after so much patient listening, she surely believed that he believes. We quote a section of his eloquent boasting, one of Marlowe's better gifts.

TAMBURLAINE

I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains,
And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about;
And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere
Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome.
Draw Forth thy sword thou mighty man-at-arms,
Intending but to raze my charmed skin,
And Jove himself will stretch his hand from heaven
To ward the blow, and shield me safe from harm.
See, how he rains down heaps of gold in showers,
As if he meant to give my soldiers pay!
And, as a sure and grounded argument
That I shall be the monarch of the East,
He sends his Soldan's daughter rich and brave,
To be my queen and portly empress.

Tamburlaine, Part One

Act One, Scene Two

Everyman edition: 1967

page 11

We are about halfway through Tamburlaine's pivotal speech, and poor Zenocrate has to be quite frightened. Her fear will mount as her persecutor, his mammoth ego ever on the rise, continues talking. He soon takes it for granted, his common

method, that he and Zenocrate shall reign as “consuls of the earth.”

TAMBURLAINE

Both we will walk upon the lofty cliffs;
And Christian merchants, that with Russian stems
Plough up hugh furrows in the Caspian Sea,
Shall vail to us as lords of all the lake;
Both we will reign as consuls of the earth,
And mighty kings shall be our senators.
Jove sometimes masked in a shepherd’s weed;
And by those steps that he hath scal’d the heavens
May we become immortal like the gods.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part One

Act One, Scene Two

Everyman edition: 1967

page 11

Of course Tamburlaine and Zenocrate will become a royal couple. Zenocrate, overwhelmed by all that has happened to her, will show no rebellious streak. She will seek to be a good and faithful wife. How else to deal with a man who holds unbeatable power and thinks himself a god?

We move to Act Two, Scene Six, to learn more about how deeply people believed in Tamburlaine’s rare, overlapping supernal qualities. We are in the battle camp of the Persians, his bitter enemies, where three characters take turns analyzing and lamenting their ferocious opponent. Cosroe, the brother of King Mycetes, begins Scene Six with nine lines that show his fear and brave determination. Geology is often a part of Tamburlaine’s powers, and Cosroe makes this clear.

COSROE

What means this devilish shepherd, to aspire.
With such a giantly presumption,
To cast up hills against the face of heaven,
And dare the force of angry Jupiter?
But, as he thrust them underneath the hills,
And press'd out fire from their burning jaws,
So will I send this monstrous slave to hell,
Where flames shall ever feed upon his soul.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part One

Act Two, Scene Six

Everyman edition: 1967

page 22

Meander, a high-placed Persian lord, picks up the thread immediately. He again refers to the wonders of his enemy's birth, a motif in the play, and connects this nativity with Tamburlaine's ambition, thereby solidly connecting heaven and earth in his belief system. Marlowe's audience would have been all-too-familiar with the concept, and a few humanists or scholars sitting among them could have traced this back to Ficino. But let Meander talk.

MEANDER

Some powers divine, or else inferred, mix'd
Their angry seeds at his conception;
For he was never sprung of human race,
Since with the spirit of his fearful pride,
He dares so doubtlessly resolve of rule,
And by profession be ambitious.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part One

Act Two, Scene Six

Everyman edition: 1967

page 22

The next Persian speaker is Ortygius, another high-ranking lord, and he does the summing up for all three. He reiterates Tamburlaine's powers in more awestruck terms, but then reaches back for all the personal bravery he can muster, reaching out to the same heavenly sources that have so far aided Tamburlaine, and waging a compact cosmic war in the following nine lines. Marlowe is at his best when he reaches beyond all possible horizons.

ORTYGIUS

What god, or fiend, or spirit of the earth,
Or monster turned to a manly shape,
Or of what mould or mettle he be made,
What star or fate so ever govern him,
Let us part on our meet encountering minds;
And, in detesting such a devilish thief,
In love of honour and defence of right,
Be arm'd against the hate of such a foe,
Whether from earth, or hell, or heaven he grew.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part One

Act Two, Scene Six

Everyman edition: 1967

page 22

It is well that Cosroe has spoken so eloquently in Scene Six for he has but two speeches left before dying.

Scene Seven opens with Cosroe, severely wounded, stumbling into Tamburlaine's camp. He rants furiously at his conqueror, "Bloody and insatiate Tamburlaine!" Corsoe still has the strength to be angry, but that will not last long. Tamburlaine shows no compassion—he never does—towards his fallen foe and instead uses this time to philosophize on souls and other divine matters. It is important to note that Cosroe has collapsed

into his enemy's camp wearing the Persian crown, previously belonging to his brother Mycetes. Tamburlaine ponders about how crowns are fought over among the gods, among which he, of course, includes himself, before entering poetic philosophy. All this time Cosroe, in his death agony, has to sit silently and listen. Tamburlaine, about to seize that Persian crown promised him at birth, turns patient, a rarity, and lets the words flow.

TAMBURLAINE

Nature, that fram'd us of four elements
Warring within our breasts for regiment,
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds:
Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world,
And measure every wandering planet's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite,
And always moving as the restless spheres,
Will us to wear ourselves, and never rest,
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
The sweet fruition of an earthly crown.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part One

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 23-24

Cosroe talks several lines before dying. In Marlowe's world, Cosroe's death might not be genuine if he did not take considerable time to describe it accurately. Tamburlaine waits till his enemy has breathed his last before removing the crown and placing it on his own head. He is not a man who stands on ceremony. He requires no one to crown him. His troops let out a great cheer, which is all the acceptance this tyrant requires.

By the Third Scene of Act Three, Zenocrate has long been the wife or empress or consort—take your pick—of Tamburlaine, and he now proceeds to praise her in exalted cosmic language that would do a sonneteer proud.

TAMBURLAINE

Zenocrate, the loveliest maid alive,
Fairer than rock of pearl and precious stone,
The only paragon of Tamburlaine;
Whose eyes are brighter than the lamps of heaven,
And speech more pleasant than sweet harmony;
That with thy looks canst clear the darken'd sky,
And calm the rage of thundering Jupiter;
Sit down by her, adorned with my crown,
As if thou wert empress of the world.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part One

Act Three, Scene Three

Everyman edition: 1967

page 32

Tamburlaine is so practiced in this glowing praise that he has probably given it several times before. We can never be certain of Zenocrate's feelings, not unless a gifted actress conveys them, but we can be certain that she stood quietly with her hands at her side and listened.

Act Four, Scene One begins with Soldan, both the monarch of Egypt and father of Zenocrate. Egypt is the next nation that Tamburlaine plans to conquer. This places Zenocrate in the same tragic role as Verdi's Aida, a renowned Italian opera composed almost three centuries later. Aida is not an Egyptian, but she passionately loves Radames, the highest-ranking Egyptian soldier. It should not be surprising that Radames will be leading his mighty forces into battle against a

tribal enemy with Aida's father as king. Of course she is torn between lover and father, the two great passions of her life. If nothing else, Aida is passionate. The chances of her story working out well are not good. These things seldom do. Aida's tragedy will happen swiftly, while Zenocrate must endure her internal conflict ever so slowly.

The Verdi comparison shows Zenocrate as a more tragic figure than she might otherwise appear. Aida truly knew the best of loves from both Radames and father. She did not live without several short scenes of magnificent closeness or ecstasy. Nothing like this could ever be said about poor, long-suffering Zenocrate. Her conflict is between two power moguls, with military activity high on their list of priorities, and their wife and daughter a distant second, if she even makes the select list. True, Tamburlaine lights up like a string of firecrackers whenever he looks at her, and he follows this with long poetic speeches. He likes to talk. He is not a passionate, no-holds-barred, romantic lover who could make a wife truly happy. He talks. His one great true love is himself. This could also be said for Soldan, Egypt's monarch, her absentee father. Tamburlaine only becomes totally absorbed in Zenocrate after she dies, when he talks, grieving brilliantly but endlessly. He spends more time, and verbiage, contemplating the construction of her magnificent burial site, a clear reflection on him, than meeting her vital, human needs when alive.

The opening scene of Act Four allows us to return to David Lean a brief moment, for a quote that establishes vast numbers preparing for battle. A nameless messenger does the talking when he reports to Soldan.

MESSENGER

Mighty lord,
Three hundred thousand men in armour clad,
Upon their prancing steeds, disdainfully
With wanton paces trampling on the ground;
Five hundred thousand footmen threatening shot,
Shaking their swords, their spears, and iron bills,
Enironing their standard round, that stood
As bristle-pointed as a thorny wood;
Their warlike engines and monition
Exceed the forces of their martial men.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part One

Act Four, Scene One

Everyman edition: 1967

page 37

This was as close to the big silver screen as an Elizabethan would ever get. The audience required fine, exquisite imaginations to handle such poetry. They were a verbal people, who routinely stood and listened in church to Sunday sermons that often lasted more than three hours. After that, all the lengthy speeches in Marlowe were easy going. They delighted in what they heard, no matter how long they had to listen. Otherwise Marlowe would not have been so remarkably popular. Otherwise his glory would not have endured.

In Scene Two of Act Four, Tamburlaine has captured Bajazeth, emperor of the Turks, and his devoted wife Zabina. Tamburlaine is not content to conquer an opponent; he must also humiliate and degrade. Hence he keeps Bajazeth trapped in a cage while his grieving wife stands helplessly by. It is these scenes where Tamburlaine seems most to enjoy himself and when he does the most talking. For Bajazeth, what would be

worse: stooped over in a cage or endlessly listening? Obviously the Elizabethan audience liked the listening—oh, so much of it—or they would not be there day after day, year after year.

We cannot make this point too strenuously. A modern reader might be astonished at how very long Marlowe's characters talk; it might be this, more than anything else, that separates him from Shakespeare. Hamlet is talkative, but his great soliloquys are a mere drop in the bucket compared to Tamburlaine and the pivotal characters who surround him. Marlowe's actors had a tremendous capacity for memorizing lines, as their author did for writing them.

Not satisfied with Bajazeth's cruel confinement, the mighty Tamburlaine yanks the Turkish emperor out of his cage, uses him as a footstool to mount his chair, and then prepares to shove him back into his cage, while all the while his wife Zabina stands sadly watching. Bajazeth and Zabina, in the most extreme circumstances, will show a deep, abiding affection for each other. They are a man and wife who love as man and wife, and they show Marlowe capable of conveying genuine feeling. The audience will notice, perhaps with solid gratification, but not Tamburlaine, for he still has so much to say. We will quote in full this twenty-six line oration, for it shows Marlowe's supreme gifts at interweaving the powers of earth and the stars, of human endeavors and godly triumphs. Tamburlaine cannot get up in the morning without thinking about his special gifts or the next realms he means to conquer.

TAMBURLAINE

Now clear this triple region of the air,
And let the Majesty of Heaven behold
Their scourge and terror tread on emperors.
Smile, stars that reign'd at my nativity,
And dim the brightness of your neighbor lamps;
Disdain to borrow light of Cynthia!
For I, the chiefest lamp of all the earth,
First rising on the east with mild aspect,
But fixed now in the meridian line,
Will send up fire to your turning spheres,
And cause the sun to borrow light of steel,
My sword struck fire from his coat to you.
Even in Bithynia, when I took this Turk;
As when a fiery exhalation,
Wrapt in the bowels of a freezing cloud,
Fighting for passage, makes the welkin crack,
And casts a flash of lightning to the earth;
But, ere I march to wealthy Persia,
Or leave Damascus and th' Egyptian fields,
As was the fame of Clymene's brain-sick son
That almost brent the axle tree of heaven,
So shall our swords, our lances, and our shot
Fill all the air with fiery meteors;
Then, when the sky shall wax as red as blood,
It shall be said I made it red myself,
To make think of naught but blood and war.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part One

Act Four, Scene Two

Everyman edition: 1967

page 39

Near the close of the play, Bajazeth and Zabina make the ultimate rebellion against the towering might and cruelty of Tamburlaine. From inside his cage, the emperor Bajazeth smashes his brains against the strong metal bars till he dies. From outside the cage, Zabina smashes her brains to death against the same bars. In a brief melodrama that approaches crudity, Marlowe has let them experience a human closeness that Tamburlaine will never know.

We move now to Marlowe's second play on Tamburlaine. Many years have passed since the close of the first play, though we are not certain how many. But we do know that Tamburlaine and Zenocrate have three grown sons: Calyphus, Amyras, Celebinus. These are not Egyptian names. No mention of Soldan, Egypt's one-time king, is given in the second play, and so we can assume Zenocrate's Aida problem has long passed. The second play will find her silently suffering a more intense pain, by watching her husband begin trying to turn each of her three sons into cruel exact replicas of himself. She is not a warlike woman. Her lot in Marlowe's two plays will never be easy, for he persistently sets traps for her; she was trapped between the long-winded courtier and her father, and now between her husband and three sons. Her situations are so severe that they can never work out right.

A modern feminist would lament that she will live out her entire life under the power of men. Sadly this is true, not only for her, but for most women in Tamburlaine's world. Zabina appears the rare woman who is treated with decency and honor by her emperor husband, and the audience might like to think they had many good years together. They are the married couple who could have most moved Shakespeare.

In the opening scene of the second Tamburlaine play, Orcanes, king of Natolia, starts the action. He is a vowed enemy of Tamburlaine, and gives the play an early epic sweep that David Lean would have been proud of in the following twenty-four line speech. Battle strategy is discussed and the Elizabethan lovers of maps would be kept happy. Gazellus is viceroy of Byrn, a comrade in arms.

ORCANES

Viceroy of Byrn, wisely hast thou said,
My realm, the centre of our empery,
Once lost, all Turkey would be overthrown;
And for that cause the Christians shall have peace.
Sclavonians, Almains, Rutters, Muffs, and Danes,
Fear not Orcanes, but great Tamburlaine;
Nor he, but Fortune that hath made him great.
We have revolted Grecians, Albanese,
Sicilians, Jews, Arabians, Turks, and Moors,
Natolians, Sorians, black Egyptians,
Illyrians, Thracians, and Bithynians,
Enough to swallow forceless Sigismund,
Yet scarce enough t' encounter Tamburlaine.
He brings a world of people to the field,
From Scythia to the oriental plage
Of India, where raging Lantchidol
Beats on the regions with his boisterous blows,
That never seaman yet discovered.
Even from the midst of fiery Cancer's tropic
To Amazonia under Capricorn;
And thence, as far as Archipelago,

All Afrik is in arms with Tamburlaine;
Therefore, viceroy, the Christians must have peace.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part Two

Act One, Scene One

Everyman edition: 1967

page 62

This lengthy speech shows how far our age has come from the Elizabethan. We might tire at so much information, so many place names, but not so for Marlowe's original audience. They wanted the world spread out before them in a wild flurry of blood and battle, and this is just what Marlowe gave them. The Elizabethans would connect all these warlike events with heavenly powers, because Marlowe's characters have taught them to think this way. The pertinent question is could anyone have written these passages better, with the answer being nobody dared try.

Orcanes is a much better poet than we have so far shown him. He and his royal cohorts, all Moslem, have signed a treaty of peace with Christian forces. The Christians betray the treaty. Marlowe was taking high risks with his predominantly Christian audience, but no one can fault the several layers of Orcanes' heated response. Personal betrayal is best represented in Marlowe's first play, when Theridamas leaves his battle comrades, in effect the people he was born with, to join Tamburlaine in the ignoble, crafty hope of coming out on the winning side. Theridamas is the betrayal of one man. What Orcanes laments, capably mingling theology and rage, is the betrayal of an entire army, the Christians.

Due to battle contingencies, Orcanes had let his forces dwindle in number, assuming he was forever safe because the Christians would not attack him. Orcanes could not have been

more wrong. The Christians place no value on oaths sworn with people bearing a religion other than their own. They notice Orcanes' temporary predicament and attack. Marlowe makes a harsh statement against Christian trustworthiness, and many in the audience must have shifted about uncomfortably in their seats, especially when Orcanes lets loose his multi-layered anger.

ORCANES

Can there such deceit in Christians,
Or treason in the fleshy heart of man
Whose shape is figure of the highest God?
Then, if there be a Christ, as Christians say,
But in their deeds deny him for their Christ,
If he be son to everliving Jove,
And hath the power of his outstretched arm,
If he be jealous of his name and honour
As is our holy prophet Mahomet,
Take here these papers as our sacrifice
And witness of thy servant's perjury!

(He tears to pieces the articles of peace.)

Open thou shining veil of Cynthia,
And make a passage from th' empyreal heaven,
That he that sits on high and never sleeps,
Nor in one place is circumscribable,
But everywhere fills every continent
With strange infusion of his sacred vigour,
May, in his endless power and purity,
Behold and venge this traitor's perjury?
Thou, Christ, thou art esteem'd omnipotent,

If thou wilt prove thyself a perfect God,
Worthy the worship of all faithful hearts,
Be now reveng'd upon this traitor's soul,
And make the power I have left behind
(Too little to defend our guiltless lives)
Sufficient to discomfit and confound
The trustless force of those false Christians! —
To arms, my lords! on Christ still let us cry:
If there be Christ, we shall have victory.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part Two

Act Two, Scene Two

Everyman edition: 1967

page 75

We quote this speech in full because excerpts would not reveal what Marlowe can so often master: a vibrant, vital, human mind actively at work, turning this way, then that way, pondering possibilities like lightning streaks, before suddenly slamming on the breaks in conclusion. In Orcanes' impassioned words, we have witnessed a battle between Mohamet and Christ, with the decisive verdict that followers of Mohamet could never act so dishonorably.

At the close of Act Two, Zenocrate takes ill and dies. Marlowe has been merciful to her. She will not witness the ever-mounting cruelty that Tamburlaine will viciously, almost sadistically, inflict on her three sons. Zenocrate is at peace. She is the most enigmatic character in both plays, because she witnesses so much and says so little. Whatever deep pain she suffers—and her situations hardly let her free from suffering—she does so in utter silence, for this is the role required of her. This is the only role she could possibly conceive of playing.

Oddly, Tamburlaine only utters profound feelings about Zenocrate after her death. Her death almost seems to be about him, as are all events, as if it was he who had suffered the gods' cruel misfortune. The physical pain that she suffers in her slow death agony makes little impression on him. When Zenocrate speaks, it is about her husband.

ZENOCRATE

Live still, my lord; O, let my sovereign live!
And sooner let the fiery element
Dissolve, and make your kingdom in the sky,
Than this base earth should shroud your majesty;
For, should I but suspect your death by mine,
The comfort of my future happiness,
And hope to meet your highness in the heavens,
Turn'd to despair, would break my wretched breast,
And fury would compound my present rest.

Tamburlaine the Great, Part Two

Act Two, Scene Four

Everyman edition: 1697

page 78

She asks for music, believed to have healing powers, and the harmony of the spheres is briefly brought into play. But the music comes too late, as so much in her life, and cannot save her.

Tamburlaine, comprehending her death and the impossible hope of ever reviving her, lets out a long outburst about his grief, which is all about his own maddening feelings with no deep feeling for the lovely woman now decreased. Yet in this poetic ranting, a dim caring for his late wife does struggle to shine through. He might have loved her more than he ever realized, certainly more than she ever knew.

TAMBURLAINE (music sounds—Zenocrate dies)

What, is she dead? Techelles, draw thy sword,
And wound the earth, that it may cleave in twain,
And we descend into th' infernal vaults,
To hale the Fatal Sisters by the hair,
And throw them in the triple moat of hell,
For taking hence my fair Zenocrate.
Casane and Theridamas, to arms!
Raise cavalieros higher than the clouds,
And with the cannon break the frame of heaven.
What god soever holds thee in his arms,
Giving thee nectar and ambrosia,
Behold me here, divine Zenocrate,
Raving, impatient, desperate, and mad,
Breaking my steeled lance, with which I burst
The rusty beams of Janus' temple-doors,
Letting out Death and tyrannizing war,
To march with me under this bloody flag!
And, if thou pitiest Tamburlaine the Great,
Come down from heaven, and live with me again!

Tamburlaine the Great, Part Two

Act Two, Scene Four

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 79-80

Tamburlaine's grief might be convincing if he ever so slightly altered his life in ways pleasing to his late wife. In scenes that follow, he acts in ways towards his three sons that could not be better designed to bring overwhelming grief to Zenocrate. In brutally training his three sons to be warriors, he deliberately cuts his own arm with his own blade, thereby convincing them how little physical pain means to him.

Curiously Tamburlaine had never received a scratch in his many battles—to break his own flesh and bleed, he had to do it himself. Far from a fun father-and-son outing, he means to terrify his sons into brave action on the battlefield. If they perform otherwise, they have the towering figure of their father to deal with, who presumably will be far more terrifying than an enemy battalion.

Calyphas, the eldest son, somehow remains unimpressed. On the next day of battle, while his two younger brothers hurl themselves into the thick of fighting and come out heroes, Calyphas remains sleeping in his tent. He is not ill. He simply has no interest in fighting. Not surprisingly, Tamburlaine will mount into a towering rage on learning this. He stabs Calyphas to death—one son, one blow—and orders the freshly bleeding, young corpse to be buried by Turkish whores. We need not be told that whores is merely Tamburlaine's synonym for Turkish women

Critics who attempt to find positive aspects in Tamburlaine's character should concentrate fully on this scene. Tamburlaine is sometimes admired for holding the Renaissance qualities of boundless vision, unlimited horizons, cosmic scope. Though he had mastered a great technology of warfare, the same might be said for Hitler, if we are able to cast aside all moral values. Marlowe has not given us a larger-than-life Renaissance man, nor did he ever intend to. Instead he presented a monstrous villain in all his scope and powers. Shakespeare's most wicked character is Richard III, but even this humpbacked assassin cannot compare to Tamburlaine. Richard is concerned with his own kingship and dynastic succession; hence he would not have murdered his son. The sudden murder of Calyphas is so evil that it would require a

separate paper to list all ramifications. But such a father could have no virtue within him, not a trace.

Marlowe's amazing success as a dramatist is to present an all-encompassing villain in all his many sides, who never ceases to startle and shock, to disgust and dismay, and who holds the rare poetic gifts of Satan himself. Milton's Satan might come to mind, but that Satan can truly be admired for his fierce independence. Tamburlaine holds the attention like a vast auto collision that has gone endlessly out of control. He frightens and fascinates. Evil can be haunting and compelling when leaping right into your face without masks or disguises. Above all, Tamburlaine is who he is, and that man is the murderer of his son. Marlowe's audience would be shocked, but those bold Elizabethans could never look away.

What makes Marlowe such a wonderful dramatist is all his primary characters speak so splendidly. The audience, fond of great rhetoric and greater poetry, must have applauded vigorously. Our final quote shall come from Theridamas, the traitor. Tamburlaine has taken ill, and his physicians are not confident. These physicians believe spiritual forces live in a person's blood, and these spirits have to keep active for life to persist. We are a long way from William Harvey.

We are also a long way from physicians who could provide any good for their patients. Tamburlaine is a case in point. His life is slowly ebbing away, not a great loss to the people in Asia and North Africa who desire peace, but Theridamas grieves. Only recently Tamburlaine has conquered a city, and drowned all survivors, including women and children. Tamburlaine will soon join them in death, and soon find out if all those gods he trusted—and felt equal to—will be

able to help him. But Theridas is a true believer and attains eloquence.

THERIDAMUS

Weep, heavens, and vanish into liquid tears!
Fall, stars that govern his nativity,
And summon all the shining lamps of heaven
To cast their bootless fires to the earth,
And shed their feeble influence in the air;
Muffle your beauties with eternal clouds;
For Hell and Darkness pitch their pitchy tents,
And Death, with armies of Cimmerian spirits,
Gives battle 'gainst the heart of Tamburlaine!
Now, in defiance of that wonted love
Your sacred virtues pour'd upon his throne,
And made his state an honour to the heavens,
These cowards invisibly assail his soul,
And threaten conquest on our sovereign;
But, if he die, your glories are disgrac'd,
Earth droops, and says that hell in heaven is plac'd!

Tamburlaine the Great, Part Two

Act Five, Scene Three

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 113-114

It now only remains for Tamburlaine to die. In his final moments, he remembers Zenocrate and insists on being buried beside her. This site will apparently satisfy his monumental craving for glory and honor. As he breathes his last, he is neither Christian nor Moslem. His only true religion has been himself. If he truly meant to respect the memory of his late

wife, he might have done well not to murder her eldest son. This one huge omission of sin would have pleased her most of all.

Chapter Forty-two:

Shakespeare's Earliest History—King John

King John is early Shakespeare, easy to overlook from an author who produced many masterpieces with characters who have become everyday figures of speech—doubting Hamlet, jealous Othello, impish Puck. But *King John* does present a cast of characters relevant to our study of Elizabethan magic. These characters live in the early thirteenth century—King John himself died in 1216—but their supernal beliefs are consistent with Shakespeare's own time, when the white magus was a figure of respect and admiration, with perhaps moments of striking awe. He was welcome at courts and palaces. This could never be said about the medieval magus who could only be dark, steeped in sin, malignant. The concept of the white magus first takes form with Ficino and attains fullest expression with Prospero.

What exactly do the characters in *King John* believe? Above all else, they believe in heaven. In this one play Shakespeare has used the word heaven an extraordinary forty-one times. By contrast hell is used only seven times. Heaven is as likely to be juxtaposed to earth as hell, but most often heaven

stands alone. One explanation—this must be an educated guess—is the arch over Shakespeare's theatre was filled with bright shiny stars, meant to represent heaven. This was not an uncommon motif in Elizabethan playhouses, and Shakespeare might have used his language to make use of the scenery. Even so, forty-one uses of heaven seems excessive. In no instance does it lead to great poetry. Why then? It would link all the primary characters together in holding supernal beliefs. Shakespeare might have done that unconsciously, but it would be a rare reader who could overlook it. The reader need not be keeping count to notice the frequent use.

Besides heaven, what do these characters trust in? They live in a planetary system called the cosmos, and this cosmos takes in all created life, the hierarchy of life, often called the chain of being, bearing the strong influence of Pseudo-Dionysius. This cosmos is alive, bustling, energetic, teeming with life, and provides widely varied metaphors for the human condition. If the human condition becomes disorderly—always a problem in the power politics of *King John*—the cosmos becomes disorderly, and a brilliant correspondence of language takes place. These stunning connections—several to be quoted—are taken for granted by the characters, who never doubt they are part of the cosmos. The conjunction of macrocosm-microcosm is given full play. What has just been described are the basic occult beliefs that can be found in Ficino and his legions of followers.

The signs of a cosmos gone awry are weird, often frightening portents accessible to human senses. Cosmos stands for order, but within that sublime, supernal order terrible cracks and monstrosities can be found. Throughout all Shakespeare's works, monster and monstrous are common words. John Jowett

is our editor of *King John*. In the text, he refers to Eleanor's illegitimate son as Bastard, not politically correct but useful. We shall do the same. The Bastard is proud of his true father, Richard the Lion-Heart, not wedded to his mother. King John knights the Bastard on the basis of his illegitimacy. Harold Bloom considers the Bastard the first of Shakespeare's great characters, the first to speak with a clearly defined, singular individual, human voice. This makes him all the better to quote. Here he is describing both the swinging door of a London tavern—not early thirteenth century—and the lion cloak of royal Austria, who will be deeply insulted by comparison to a monster.

BASTARD

Saint George that swunged the dragon, and e'er since,
Sits on's horseback at mine hostess' door,
Teach us some fence! (To Austria) sirrah,
 were I at home
At your den, sirrah, with your lioness,
I would set an ox-head to your lion's hide
And make a monster of you.

King John

Act Two, Scene One

lines 288-293

Austria, overwhelmed, as he should be, can only reply:
“Peace, no more.”

In the same act and scene, a nameless Citizen of the besieged city of Angers suggest peace can be attained by the marriage of Blanche of Spain, nephew of King John, and Louis the Dauphin, son of the French King. Though the Citizen's suggestion seems obvious, and a welcome relief from endless bloodshed, he must argue at great lengths. This play is filled

with lengthy arguments, almost as if the primary characters belonged to a long-winded debating society, with speeches often interrupted or concluded with terrible outbursts of warfare; this is the play's structure, A-B-A-B-A-B, almost conceived randomly, with far more emphasis on rhetoric. The play only works because Shakespeare has provided so many fair to excellent talkers.

It remains curious the wise Citizen was not given a proper name, because a section of his speech resembles Shakespeare's famous, "master-mistress" sonnet, number 20. This sonnet, following Aristophanes' lecture in *The Symposium*, brings together the two sexes in witty, alchemical, metaphysical language. Only the concluding couplet indicates Shakespeare's affection is towards a man. The alchemical line is, "Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth." The complexity of both genders meeting is conveyed in the opening two lines: "A woman's face, with nature's own hand painted, /Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion." The confusion is enhanced with lines 7-8. "A man in hue, all hues in his controlling, /Which steals men's eyes, and women's souls amazeth."

The Citizen echoes this sonnet after his lavish praise of Blanche to the Dauphin. His syntax now becomes difficult, contorted, tied in knots, rather like Sonnet 20, and he learns from both Aristophanes and this sonnet that men and women, especially this particular couple standing before him, must feel a great disconnect, a hollow void or shell, everlasting, till they unite together.

CITIZEN

Such as she is in beauty, virtue, birth,
Is the young Dauphin every way complete;
If not complete, O, say he is not she

And she again wants nothing—to name want—
If want it be not that she is not he.
He is the half part of a blessed man,
Left to be finished by such as she;
And she a fair divided excellence,
Whose fullness of perfection lies in him.
O, two such silver currents when they join
Do glorify the banks that bound them in,
And two such shores to two such streams made one,
Two such controlling bounds, shall you be, Kings,
To these two princes if you marry them.

King John

Act Two, Scene One

lines 434-446

The Citizen, not surprisingly, still has more to say. He connects the forces of nature with the vagaries of political power. He becomes indeed a cosmic poet, if only briefly. To protect his city is to safeguard from nature's chaos.

CITIZEN

This union shall do more than battery can
To our fast-closed gates, for at this match,
With swifter spleen than powder can enforce,
The mouth of passage shall be fling wide ope,
And give you entrance. But without this match,
The sea enraged is not half so deaf,
Lions more confident, mountains and rocks
More free from motion, no, not Death himself
In mortal fury half so peremptory,
As we keep this city.

King John

Act Two, Scene One

lines 447-456

Blanche and Louis, like so many couples-to-be in Shakespeare, fall in love at first sight, though not before listening to considerable talking. Louis then is given eight superb lines of magic love poetry, making an obvious pun on sun and son, while using the strong Renaissance belief in the magical power of the eyes, for good or evil, always potent, falling in love or casting the evil eye. Louis is not wasting his pun, since his speech is in direct response to his royal father's strong direct question: "What sayst thou, boy? Look in the lady's face." Act Two, Scene One, line 496. Louis' sun and shadow are a little difficult to follow. But surely the sun covers all as does his father, and so does the "wondrous miracle" of his new found love. Louis starts with wonder and adds miracle within the same breath.

LOUIS THE DAUPHIN

I do, my lord, and in her eye I find
A wonder, or a wondrous miracle,
The shadow of myself formed in her eye;
Which, being but the shadow of your son,
Becomes a sun and makes your son a shadow.
I do protest I never loved myself
Till now enfixed I beheld myself
Drawn in the flattering table of her eye.

King John
Act Two, Scene One
lines 497-504

The Bastard does not take seriously Louis' sudden proclamation of near divine love. In an "aside" addressed only to the audience or reader, he tears the sun-miracle speech into shreds, by concentrating solely on bodily parts rather than shadows. He does not place much hope on a romance built on

shadows. The angry ferocity of his language is in direct contrast to the smooth, soft tones of Louis. Of course the Bastard cannot let any characters on stage hear him, for he wishes to maintain his high place at court. He also desires to keep his head on his shoulders. We quote the Bastard to show Shakespeare has not committed himself to magical eyes, though of course he knows and employs the tradition. His goal is the conflict of widely varying poetic wills that make strong drama. So the Bastard speaks, if only to us.

BASTARD

Drawn in the flattering table of her eye,
Hanged in the frowning wrinkle of her brow,
And quartered in her heart: he doth espy
 Himself love's traitor. This is pity now,
That hanged and drawn and quartered there should be
In such a love so vile a lout as he.

King John

Act Two, Scene One

lines 505-510

The wedding takes place, rather hurriedly since life-and-death matters of state are involved. Constance, mother of the young boy Arthur, is of course shocked and horrified, for without this wedding her son would have serious rights to England's throne. The wedding nullifies all those rights, and Constance looks to Nature for explication. Her son is physically beautiful, which explains her extreme, almost furious devotion. She is constant. She describes a theoretical son made horrid by Nature, a son she could never love. For Constance, as much as Louis, looks are close to everything. Constance rants with her little confused son the audience.

CONSTANCE

If thou that bidd'st me be content wert grim,
Ugly and sland'rous to thy mother's womb,
Full of unpleasing blots and sightless stains,
Lame, foolish, crooked, swart, prodigious,
Patched with foul moles and eye-offending marks,
I would not care, I then would be content,
For then I should not love, see, no, nor thou
Become thy great birth, nor deserve a crown.

King John

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 43-50

But all her spouting to the contrary, the wedding is concluded, and King Philip begins Act Three by comparing the resulting truce to alchemy. He speaks directly to Blanche, his new daughter-in-law. Alchemical art often pictured a sun shaped like an eye, an eye with short light rays extending evenly about, with slight touches to indicate eyes and a smile. Transforming “clodding earth” or lesser metals into “glittering gold” is a basic goal of alchemy. Without the gold this passage is not too far from Louis’ shadows. A cherished holiness pervades both.

KING PHILIP (to Blanche)

'Tis true, fair daughter, and this blessed day
Ever in France shall be kept festival.
To solemnize, this day, the glorious sun
Stays in his course and plays the alchemist,
Turning with splendour of his precious eye
The meager cloddy earth to glittering gold,

The yearly course that brings this day about
Shall never see it but a holy day.

King John

Act Two, Scene Two
lines 1-8

The wedding strategy might have worked, and England might have enjoyed peace with France, if not for the sudden intrusion of Cardinal Pandolf of Milan, representative of the Pope in Rome. Considerable talking by many parties ensues. Result: King John breaks with the Pope, and thereby King Philip must break with John. The two monarchs actually hold hands while this monumental statecraft is decided. When they let go of hands, they are again at war. Alchemy is reversed when King John speaks about tribute owed the Pope, which of course he will not consider paying. It would seem a good Protestant wrote or spoke these lines, even though historically Luther was more than three centuries away.

KING JOHN

Though you and all the kings of Christendom
Are led so grossly by this meddling priest,
Dreading the curse that money may buy out,
And by the merit of vile gold, dross, dust,
Purchase corrupted pardon of a man,
Who in that sale sells pardon from himself;
Though you and all the rest so grossly led
This juggling witchcraft with revenue cherish;
Yet I alone, alone do me oppose
Against the Pope, and count his friends my foes.

King John

Act Three, Scene One
lines 88-97

Keep in mind John is still holding hands while he speaks these lines and immediately suffers verbal excommunication from Pandolf, not surprisingly. King John never displays supernal or magical powers. What he vehemently denies is these powers could possibly come from a single frail human man, ergo the Pope. If this means renewed war, so be it.

Blanche, the unhappiest of brides, has her own sun image: "The sun's o'ervast with blood; fair day, adieu!" Act Three, Scene One, line 252. She then talks, rather poignantly, in hopeless terms similar to Verdi's Aida. No matter what side wins in the battle, she loses horribly.

Yet no character in this play can grieve more, or with a more hideous array of images, than Constance. Her wickedly irreverent poetry understands that if human justice fails all around her—she has already told us her son Arthur is her "whole world" and he has died—then correspondingly Nature too must fail. The most complete failure is of course Death, but Constance will not settle for dying peacefully in her sleep. For her death to hold meaning and somehow match the untold horror of Arthur's passing, her Death, always personified, the crudest of emblematics, must be horror beyond horror, with her very person turning Monster, though not in the cutting playful sense the Bastard used the word. She needs make a minor art form out of Death, a grotesque Gothic before that term was coined. If human laws fail, then Nature's laws turn outrageously cruel. No matter how much King Philip and Pandolf wish she would quiet down, Constance shall have her say.

CONSTANCE

No, I defy all counsel, all redress,
But that which ends all counsel, true redress:
Death, Death, O amiable, lovely Death!

Thou odoriferous stench, sound rottenness!
Arise forth from the couch of lasting night,
Thou hate and terror to prosperity,
And I will kiss thy detestable bones,
And put my eyeballs in thy vaulty brows,
And ring these fingers with thy household worms,
And stop this gap of breath with fulsome dust,
And be a carrion monster like thyself.
Come grin on me, and I will think thou smil'st,
And buss thee as thy wife. Misery's love,
O, come to me!

King John

Act Three, Scene Four

lines 23-35

The overall value of *King John* is the several important characters are granted gifted qualities of speech that often merge with occult leanings. A reader is not likely to find a more dyed-in-the-wool Catholic than Pandolf, or a Catholic who can cause more trouble, but Pandolf will step far outside his church restrictions to declare himself a prophet. It is unlikely the Pope he serves would strongly approve. Pandolf's audience is Louis, the bridegroom who eagerly prefers warfare to marital bliss. Pandolf begins: "Now hear me speak with a prophetic spirit." Act Three, Scene Four, line 126. Pandolf predicts young Arthur will not live long now that he exists under King John's power. John urgently needs Arthur out of the way to secure his throne. His scheming is Machiavellian, three centuries before that political thinker lived. Louis responds: "But what shall I gain by young Arthur's Fall?" line 141. Pandolf, always ready with answers, replies that Louis and Blanch can replace Arthur as valid claimants to England's throne. Louis can rightfully fret he

will hence lose his life like Arthur. For all his bluster, the Dauphin is not a confident man.

Pandolf holds all the boldness in this scene. He calls his young companion “green,” and makes an extensive prediction of how England shall respond to Arthur’s death. Pandolf becomes an expert on English belief systems and superstitions. He treats Arthur like a young martyr for the faith. He never quite stops being Catholic.

PANDOLF

How green you are, and fresh in this old world!
John lays you plots; the times conspire with you;
For he that steeps his safety in true blood
Shall find but bloody safety and untrue.
This act, so vilely born, shall cool the hearts
Of all his people, and freeze up their zeal,
That none so small advantage shall step forth
To check his reign but they will cherish it;
No natural exhalation in the sky,
No scope of nature, no distempered day,
No common wind, no customed event,
But they will pluck away his natural cause,
And call them meteors, prodigies, and signs,
Abortives, presages, and tongues of heaven
Plainly denouncing vengeance upon John.

King John
Act Three, Scene Four
lines 145-159

It is worth noting that in actual stage time Arthur is not yet dead, though his situation under John’s command places his life in direct jeopardy. Neither Constance nor Pandolf are overreacters, for they smell the same foul stench of the same

cruel situation. After his long prophetic speech, Pandolf uses microcosm-macrocosm imagery. A true Francophile, he states a mere ten French soldiers could rescue Arthur, and compares this startling analysis with snowfall: “Or as a little snow tumbled about / Anon becomes a mountain.” Lines 176-177. In similar language, Pembroke ponders the imminent death of Arthur.

PEMBROKE

Stay yet, Lord Salisbury; I'll go with thee,
And find the 'inheritance of this poor child,
His little kingdom of a forced grave.
That blood which owed the breadth of all this isle
Three foot of it doth hold. Bad world the while.
This must not be thus borne. This will break out
To all our sorrows; and ere long, I doubt.

King John

Act Four, Scene Two
lines 96-102

A young boy’s brutal death is aptly compared to a “bad world.” If Arthur, ever so innocent, can be murdered, then so die all positive thoughts of this world, at least for a time, chaos setting in, only to be resolved till the next earth-splitting crisis.

This play hustles from crisis to crisis, always pushed forward by long speechmaking, and this makes six quick lines from this same act and scene so curious. An unnamed Messenger makes two momentous, mind-toppling announcements: both Eleanor and Constance have died, within three days of each other. If Pandolf were on stage, he might snidely remark that Constance talked herself to death. But Pandolf is not there, so this does not happen, although Pandolf is a great talker himself. That would be a hard and fast

requirement for entrance in this play. Yet the Messenger is so brief, concise, swift.

MESSENGER

My liege, her ear
Is stopped with dust. The first of April died
Your noble mother. And as I hear, my lord,
The Lady Constance in a frenzy died
Three days before; but this from rumour's tongue
I idly heard; if true or false I know not.

King John
Act Four, Scene Two
lines 119-124

This speech and its aftermath might be the most curious part of the play. Shakespeare's audience would expect church bells to be tolling across France and England for two such deaths. The English Channel might flip over on its side. Yet no one, including the Messenger, seems to know exactly what happened. King John, totally confused—as who would not be?—wonders aloud about how his mother's death affects the various claims of royal power. He is not a son deeply grieving. If a parent opposite to Constance can be found, he is it.

Arthur still lives, though he will die before this scene closes. John must presume him dead when he ponders the death of his mother. Arthur will never learn the sad frantic death of his mother. Shakespeare's audience had to know its history very well to keep up with all of this. All pondering comes to a short abrupt stop when the Bastard enters the stage with a self-proclaimed prophet, a commoner named Peter from Pomfret. Shakespeare might have liked all the alliteration that allows.

The Bastard takes center stage and holds it. He might have a prophet with him, but he does the talking. The main characters never turn aside a chance to talk.

BASTARD

How I sped among the clergymen
The sums I have collected shall express.
But as I travelled hither through the land,
I find the people strangely fantasied,
Possessed with rumours, full of idle dreams,
Not knowing what they fear, but full of fear.
And here's a prophet that I brought with me
From forth the streets of Pomfret, whom I found
With many hundreds treading on his heels;
To whom he sung, in rude, harsh-sounding rhymes,
That ere the next Ascension Day at noon
Your highness should deliver up your crown.

King John

Act Four, Scene Two

lines 141-152

Ascension Day poses a nice touch of irony. This Christian feast commemorates the bodily ascension into heaven of Jesus, often depicted by Renaissance artists who lived two centuries after the time of this play. So while Jesus is slowly rising in great sublime majesty, King John will fall crashing to bare earth in utter disgrace. The prophet does not hold out a chance of pity. King John of course puts Peter in prison, to await execution on Ascension Day. Do note the Messenger still stands on stage. Nothing has been done about him. The Bastard has more news: the French are passionately upset about the murder of beloved Arthur, who yet lives till the beginning of the next scene, Act Four, Scene Three. This is not an easy play to

follow. John's own noblemen have turned against him—only the most alert playgoer would recall both Eleanor and Constance died only fifty lines ago—and England's king sends off the Bastard at full speed, "Be Mercury," to approach the nobles. The Messenger, who has been standing aimlessly about the stage for quite some time, is sent hurrying rather meaninglessly after the Bastard. In spite of all the warfare this play contains, these two running messengers might provide the most genuine action the audience sees.

Hubert enters, and of course John assumes Hubert has already blinded Arthur before the murder, as per instruction. Alone with the king, Hubert will confess he could not perform the dastardly deed, so King John and the audience are now assured Arthur lives, though again only till this scene closes. Hubert not only brings his own innocence with him but some of the finest occult language in the play. He enters with perhaps the most striking occult passage in the play.

HUBERT

My lord, they say five moons were seen tonight,
Four fixed, and the fifth did whirl about
The other four in wondrous motion.

King John
Act Four, Scene Two
lines 184-185

For once King John is almost at a loss for words and responds, with understanding alarm, "Five moons?"

Hubert responds in explicit detail how Londoners are responding. Young Arthur has only two hundred lines of verse to live, but the occult has taken over. King John, like all major

characters, is a believer. He might doubt Hubert's competence in key areas, but not this.

KING JOHN

Five moons?

HUBERT

Old men and beldams in the streets
Do prophesy upon it dangerously.
Young Arthur's death is common in their mouths,
And when they talk of him they shake their heads,
And whisper one another in the ear;
And he that speaks doth grip the hearer's wrist,
While he that hears makes fearful action,
With wrinkled brows, with nods, with rolling eyes.
I saw a smith stand with his hammer, thus,
The whilst his iron did on the anvil cool,
With open mouth swallowing a tailor's news,
Who, with his shears and measure in his hand,
Standing on slippers which his nimble haste
Had falsely thrust upon contrary feet,
Told of a many thousand warlike French
That were embattailed and ranked in Kent.
Another lean unwashed artificer
Cuts off his tale, and talks of Arthur's death.

King John

Act Four, Scene Two

lines 186-203

Hubert describes a city filled with believers. He might be standing before a playhouse of believers

In the next scene, possibly difficult to stage, Arthur—at long last—dies. In attempting to escape from prison, the young

boy takes a terrible fall and his last breath escapes him. A few lines ago, King John has spouted, “for my rage was blind, /And foul imaginary eyes of blood / Presented thee more hideous than thou art.” He addresses Hubert, who never gets a chance to respond as the scene abruptly closes but who surely would appreciate the flaming language.

A scene later however, Hubert will not get off so easily, for the Bastard confronts him over Arthur’s death. Arthur is truly dead and Hubert is truly innocent, but that does not stop the Bastard from lashing out. He begins in Christian terms.

BASTARD

Here’s a good world! Knew you of this fair work?
Beyond the infinite and boundless reach
Of mercy, if thou didst this deed of death
Art thou damned, Hubert.

King John

Act Four, Scene Three
lines 116-119

Hubert, understandably overwhelmed, makes the weak response, “Upon my soul—” Soul is the correct term within this overall belief system. He is the rare character held speechless, and the Bastard roars back in the best microcosmic sense. This kind of verse shall not get much better.

BASTARD

If thou didst but consent
To this most cruel act, do but despair;
And if thou want’st a cord, the smallest thread
That ever spider twisted from her womb
Will serve to strangle thee; a rush will be a beam
To hang thee on; or wouldest thou drown thyself,

Put but a little water in a spoon
And it shall be, as all the ocean,
Enough to stifle such a villain up.
I do suspect thee very grievously.

King John

Act Four, Scene Three
lines 126-135

Hubert takes five lines to defend himself, but the Bastard is not listening. It might be unlikely the over-compromised Hubert will ever be listened to again. King John, ever desperate, makes amends to Pandolf by surrendering his crown to the Pope's courier—and yes, this happens on Ascension Day so Peter the Prophet has his forecast fulfilled. The Shakespeare of this play would not have it any other way.

Perhaps the strangest part of this often strange play occurs at the start of Act Five, Scene Seven, with the sudden, totally unexpected appearance of Prince Henry, son of King John, still living but seriously ill for four previous scenes. Prince Henry only appears in the play's final scene. Presumably he has been living for quite some time, which disqualifies and sets aside all royal power disputes of the play's previous five acts. Why so much concern about Arthur if Prince Henry lives? Why any serious concern at all? Arthur apparently lived and died in vain. Would his frantic mother not have known about Prince Henry? Would not alert historians have been sitting in Shakespeare's audience, and tapped each other on the shoulder and asked: what gives?

Of course *King John* does not rise or fall on historical accuracy. It succeeds if the audience or reader can handle the many long speeches with so much magnificent poetry thrown in.

Chapter Forty-three:

Shakespeare's Early Gothic Melodramas—

Titus Andronicus and *Timon of Athens*

T. S. Eliot made a perceptive comment about Wilkie Collins 800-page Victorian novel, *The Woman in White*. Eliot stated this novel is melodrama, but the work is as good as melodrama can ever get. It would be curious how Eliot would judge the two minor Shakespeare plays to be discussed in this chapter: *Titus Andronicus* and *Timon of Athens*. Both these plays contain and sustain high levels of melodrama, both in action and long incessant cursing.

Titus Andronicus has more horrid blood and gore than a large collection of Stephen King novels. The heroine Lavinia, immaculately chaste, watches the brutal murder of her husband whom she rather likes; the two cutthroats next rape her, then cut out her tongue and cut off her hands, curiously referred to as limbs, so she can never reveal her assailants. One suspects this might have been too much for Mr. Eliot, but the horror only increases. Titus, Lavinia's father, captures the two killer-rapists and bakes them in a pastry, which their mother unknowingly eats—after which the main characters take turns stabbing each

other to death. This brief synopsis does not tell the full horror—we have left out executions, Titus murdering his son Mutius and then weeping buckets over the beheadings of his two other sons, whom he foolishly tried to save by allowing Aaron the Moor, the all-out villain in the play, to chop off his hand. Limbs go at a very low price in this play.

We bring in this horrific plot outline because *Titus Andronicus* is not a well-known Shakespeare play, probably for the reasons already described. Harold Bloom states he would not wish to see the play performed “except by Mel Brooks and his zanies,” a strong indication the great critic does not take the relentless bloodbath entirely seriously.

What we do take seriously in this play, and in *Timon of Athens*, are passages from Shakespeare seldom looked at. These passages depict the living cosmos that Ficino proclaimed. Again Shakespeare need not have read Ficino or Plotinus to provide poetic grasp to a world soul revealing itself in earthly nature, as well as commentaries that could only come from Pythagoras or alchemy.

The plot of *Timon* can be told simply. Somehow Timon came by a very large sum of riches—the playwright never tells us how or anything else about Timon’s background, other than he had once been a gallant soldier. Timon lives his life at foolish extremes. When he has the money, he spends it all fast and furious, till he’s not only bankrupt, but has piled up huge debts to several men of importance and prestige. Timon faces the death sentence when he cannot pay his debts. His so-called friends refuse to assist, even while wearing gifts of Timon’s jewelry. One is reminded of the classic Hollywood western *High Noon*, when sheriff Gary Cooper goes from friend to friend, or places where his friends are likely to be found, like

the small frontier church. The sheriff, like Timon, receives not a single offer of help against notorious outlaws about to enter town. Again like Timon, his life is at risk. But the sheriff stays to fight his own battles alone. Timon flees into the uncivilized woods, lives as a half-mad unkempt hermit, vowing to hate all mankind and favor only dogs, because of how badly he feels he has been treated. Apemantus, the churlish philosopher, sums up Timon's wild extremes of behavior to his face. "The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends." This behavior will in the end destroy Timon. We have again provided a brief plot synopsis because the play is not well-known.

Aaron's second speech begins with astrological portents, comparing himself and his secret lover, the wicked Queen Tamora. His evil is too great for the planets, also perhaps for this play.

AARON

Madam, though Venus govern your desires,
Saturn is dominator over mine.
What signifies my deadly-standing eye,
My silence, and my cloudy melancholy,
My fleece of wooly hair that now uncurls
Even as an adder when she doth unroll
To do some fatal execution?
No, madam, these are no venereal signs,
Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand,
Blood and revenge are hammering in my head.

Titus Andronicus

Act Two, Scene Three

lines 30-39

Aaron could be called the black magus in the play, though he causes hell to break out frequently without vast supernatural means. He does use gold, which purports to have supernal powers in Elizabethan times, to trap innocent men; this brief speech takes place before the one previously quoted.

AARON

Know that this gold must coin a stratagem
Which, cunningly effected, will beget
A very excellent piece of villainy.
And so repose, sweet gold, for their unrest
That have their alms out of the Empress' chest.

Titus Andronicus

Act 2, Scene 3

lines 5-9

Aaron must hide the gold for his wicked plot to be effective. When he later finds it, he will connect it with Titus' two sons, as proof they are guilty of hired murder. His scheme is effective. His cunning is merciless. He persuades Titus to let him cut off his hand to save his sons from beheading. Titus lacks the wit and intelligence to keep up with the Moor, a black magus in the firm sense he instigates and controls so much horror. What Titus receives in return for his hand is the two decapitated heads of his sons, plus his hand, which his handless daughter Lavinia carries in her teeth. It would not be stretching a point to suspect some dark comedy in Shakespeare's intention.

Queen Tamora combines evil and nature in a brilliant, unsettling speech, which concludes with her two sons murdering Bassanio, Lavinia's husband. Lavinia's fate, tragic beyond words, even Shakespeare's words, will soon follow. This play is not valued from the sheer piling on of crude

inhuman violence, but from extended passages of great original verse, as the Queen speaks.

TAMORA

Have I not reason, think you, to look pale?
These two have 'ticed me hither to this place.
A barren detested vale you see it is;
The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,
Overcome with moss and baleful mistletoe.
Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds
Unless the nightly owl or fatal raven,
And when they showed me this abhorred pit
They told me here at dead time of the night
A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,
Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins
Would make such fearful and confused cries
As any mortal body hearing it
Should straight fall mad or else die suddenly.
No sooner had they told this hellish tale
But straight they told me they would bind me here
Unto the body of a dismal yew
And leave me to this miserable death.
And then they called me foul adulteress,
Lascivious Goth, and all the bitterest terms
That ever ear did hear to such effect.
And had you not by wondrous fortune come,
This vengeance on me had they executed.
Revenge it as you love your mother's life,
Or be ye not hence forward called my children.

Titus Andronicus

Act Two, Scene Three

lines 91-115

We quote this passage in full rather than several snippets from similar passages. Tamora takes in so much of nature, the seasons, her own reputation as Roman queen from a Goth country thus mingled with “dead time of night,” a population explosion of evil-portending creatures—fiends, snakes, toads—her own mortal body. At last in this play Tamora is a character come alive, though her force of strength will only lead to the brutal deaths of others.

Marcus, the loyal brother of Titus, gives a similar lengthy speech, which takes in so much of the living cosmos and so much of the tragedies below. The entire speech begins early in Act Two, Scene Four, at line 11, and continues to line 57. We shall not quote it all, but it requires several close readings, for the value in this blood-soaked play lies in the close renditions of human emotions linked with vital cosmic nature. We quote two short passages.

MARCUS

If I do wake, some planet strike me down
That I may slumber an eternal sleep.
Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungentle hands
Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare
Of her two branches, those sweet ornaments
Whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in,
And might not gain so great a happiness
As half thy love. Why dost not speak to me?
Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,
Doth rise and fall between they rose'd lips,

Coming and going with thy honey breath.

Titus Andronicus

Act Two, Scene Four

lines 14-25

MARCUS

O, had the monster seen those lily hands
Tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute
And make the silken strings delight to kiss them,
He would not then have touched them for his life.
Or had he heard the heavenly harmony
Which that sweet tongue hath made,
He would have dropped his knife and fell asleep,
As Cerberus at the Thracian poet's feet.

Titus Andronicus

Act Two, Scene Four

lines 44-51

Later in the play, Tamora gets another chance to rhapsodize on nature, while never straying from her needs in the plot.

TAMORA

King, be thy thoughts imperious like thy name.
Is the sun dimmed, that gnats do fly in it?
The eagle suffers little birds to sing,
And is not careful what they mean thereby,
Knowing that with the shadow of his wings
He can at pleasure stint their melody.
Even so mayst thou the giddy men of Rome.
Then cheer thy spirit; for know thou, Emperor,
I will enchant the old Andronicus

With words more sweet and yet more dangerous
Than baits to fish or honey-stalks to sheep
When as the one is wounded with the bait,
The other blotted with delicious feed.

Titus Andronicus

Act Four, Scene Four
lines 82-93

It would be nice to feel better about this play—and *Timon of Athens*—than a marvelous collection of passages to be quoted and wisely pondered over, but the extreme, far-fetched, unbalanced natures of both plots sadly leave us little choice. Both plays show the sacred Neo-Platonic hierarchy badly destroyed, spat upon, with only sufficient deaths at the close of Act Five sufficient to provide the audience a grimace of hope.

Timon does open with the poet speaking a line that shows we cannot be far wrong in our analysis: “See, / Music of bounty, / All these spirits the poor /Hath conjured to attend.” Act One, Scene One, lines 5-7. The magic will be Timon the outcast’s strange finding of secretly buried gold. Otherwise Timon’s endlessly long, cursing speeches, though dynamic and interesting in parts, betray a rather dead cosmos, rather like the death in spirit of the speaker. His curses are a catalogue of horrid wishes he desires for other humans, but he lacks the supernal power to make them happen. He is a black magus without the magic wand, though this will change, temporarily, when Timon stumbles across the buried gold.

Elizabethans would have recognized Timon honored the alchemical belief system to attain gold. He stands alone on stage, half naked, no doubt looking half civilized, holding a spade. He recognizes the earth and cosmos are alive. He realizes great fortune can be found, but he holds no desire for it—this

latter fact is essential to attaining gold, and Elizabethans knowing their alchemy would have immediately grasped it. Timon is like an alchemist poised before an experiment in his alembic, the vase-shaped glass furnace most favored by alchemists. If he is to attain gold, he cannot wish for it. If he is to attain gold by whatever crude or brilliant experiment he devises, he can have no desire for gold or any riches. His reward is the careful act of doing. Only if he attains that meek and selfless posture is the production of gold possible. Elizabethans would have recognized this simple rule facing Timon: to desire gold is never to get it, but to desire nothing heightens and makes possible the chance of owning everlasting gold.

In short, the alchemist's task was spiritual. What happened in his alembic accompanied divine prayers to his deity. Timon stands on the edge of this. He digs for roots, not wealth. Only this allows him the strong possibility of digging up gold with his modest spade. Shakespeare's audience would have been sitting on the edge of their seats for they'd have a fairly good idea what was happening. This same audience would have understood how Bassanio won Portia in the casket game by choosing lead—not gold or silver, but lead—in *The Merchant of Venice*. Let us look in on the weary Timon as he approaches the earth with his trusty spade.

Elizabethans might be reminded of the famous Parisian alchemist Nicholas Flamel, who somehow came across a vast amount of wealth in gold in 1482. Both gold and mystery are real. Flamel used his sudden riches to fund numerous hospitals, orphanages, and charitable homes. Many still endure, so of course Shakespeare's audience might find Flamel slipping into mind.

TIMON

O blessed breeding sun, draw from the earth
Rotten humidity; below thy sister's orb
Infect the air. Twinned brothers of one womb,
Whose procreation, residence, and birth
Scarce is dividant, touch them with several fortunes,
The greater scorns the lesser. Not nature,
To whom all sores lay siege, can bear great fortune
But by contempt of nature.
It is the pasture lands the brother 'sides,
The want that makes him lean.
Raise me this beggar and demit that lord,
The senator shall bear contempt hereditary,
The beggar native honour. Who dares, who dares
In purity of manhood stand upright
And say 'This man's a flatterer'? If one be,
So are they all, for every Greece of fortune
Is smoothed by that below. The learned pate
Ducks to the golden fool. All's obliquy;
There's nothing level in our cursed natures
But direct villainy. Therefore be abhorred
All feasts, societies, and throngs of men.
His semblable, yea, himself, Timon despairs.
Destruction fang mankind. Earth, yield me roots.

Timon of Athens

Act Four, Scene Three

lines 1-24

What happens next? Not surprisingly in our alchemical scheme, Timon digs and finds gold. Considering how often he gives away portions of this gold in the remainder of the play, he apparently stumbled on a not-so-small fortune. He praises his

newfound gold—and its immense, almost supernal powers—in a twenty line soliloquy. He includes the heavens in his raptures. But his infernal bitterness remains. Not all the gold in the planet can cure that. It is almost as if the newfound gold has given a more cruel, sharper edge to his anger.

TIMON

What is here?
Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold?
No, gods, I am no idle votarist:
Roots, you clear heavens. Thus much of this will make
Black white, foul fair, wrong right,
Base noble, old young, coward valiant.
Ha, you gods! Why this, what, this, you gods? Why, this
Will lug your priests and servants from your sides,
Pluck stout men's pillows from below their heads.
This yellow slave
Will knit and break religions, bless the 'accursed,
Make the hoar leprosy adored, place thieves,
And give them title, knee, and approbation
With senators on the bench. This is it
That makes the wappered widow wed again.
She whom the spittle house and ulcerous sores
Would cast the gorge at, this embalms and spices
To th' April day again. Come, damned earth,
Thou common whore of mankind, that puts odds
Among the rout of nations; I will make thee
Do thy right nature.

Timon of Athens

Act Four, Scene Three
lines 25-44

When he hears the sounds of others approaching, he at once hides his gold. He compares the failure of his friends to assist him financially in cosmic terms. With all that gold buried at his feet, he still has not forgotten. (Timon also parodies the transmigration of animals in Pythagorean thought in a long prose passage, Act Four, Scene Three, lines 329–347. This is a rare speech where fetching humor overcomes his livid bitterness.)

TIMON

As the moon does, by wanting light to give.
But then I could not like the moon;
There were no suns to borrow of.

Timon of Athens
Act Four, Scene Three
lines 67-69

Timon will angrily fling small pieces of gold to two prostitutes, the only two women in the play with speaking lines. Shakespeare will never again use women so rarely. The prostitutes allow Timon to add syphilis, a new disease in Elizabethan times, to his cursing. Timon seldom actually talks to people. He overpowers them with long blank-verse curses and fails to heed their response. The frequent cursing, perhaps tedious to the playgoer, seems to have an end in itself. Timon must like doing it, because he does it so often. He does not require another character to be standing on the stage with him. Maybe he hopes the gods are listening, that is, if he believed in any.

We should close with Timon's curse about his gold, when he rages at thieves who are foolish enough to try taking it with him. The quote is long, but is the last time we shall have to listen to him.

TIMON

Nor on the beasts themselves, the birds, and fishes;
You must eat men. Yet thanks I must you con
That you are thieves profess'd, that you work not
In holier shapes: for there is boundless theft
In limited professions. Rascal thieves,
Here's gold. Go, suck the subtle blood o' the grape,
Till the high fever seethe your blood to froth,
And so 'scape hanging: trust the physician;
His antidotes are poison, and he slays
Moe than you rob: take wealth and lives together;
Do villainy, do, since you protest to do't,
Like workmen. I'll example you with thievery:
The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Robbs the vast sea: the moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun:
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
The moon into salt tears: the earth's a thief,
That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n
From general excrement: each thing's a thief:
The laws, your curb and whip, in their rough power
Have uncheck'd theft. Love not yourselves; away!
Rob one another. There's more gold. Cut throats:
All that you meet are thieves: to Athens go,
Break open shops; nothing can you steal,
But thieves do lose it: steal not less for this
I give you; and gold confound you how soe'er!

Timon of Athens

Act Four, Scene Three

lines 426-452

A nameless first senator speaks a brief line that most aptly describes Timon, but also Titus, and with this wise comment we close, "His discontents are unremovably coupled to nature." Act Five, Scene Two, lines 109-110.

Chapter Forty-four:

W. H. Auden Connects Ficino and Shakespeare

W. H. Auden, the great American poet, was also an expert on Shakespeare, as evidenced by his *Lectures on Shakespeare*, delivered in 1946-47, edited by Arthur Kirsch as a major contribution to studies on the Bard, and published by Princeton University Press in 2000.

Having gotten that necessary housework out of the way, we shall concern ourselves with Auden's lecture on *Love's Labour's Lost*, which shows his knowledge of how Shakespeare applies Ficino and Pico to his work. The play begins with four men, rather foolishly, vowing to avoid women for three years while involving themselves in intense private study. They are forming a small academy with no value placed on physical pleasures, and Auden is quick to call this a Neo-Platonic academy, far too spiritual to be practical, and from that slowly, ever widening flaw derives much humor. The four would-be scholars only need to encounter four women before their sexual passions are set off, and their three year goal is unlikely to last three minutes, certainly not three acts.

Auden believes *Love's Labour's Lost* takes place within a cosmology that comes straight from Ficino. He speaks at great length about this, and his connection of Ficino and Shakespeare is so close to this book's theme, and Auden is such a major literary figure, that we feel compelled to quote Auden at length.

Ficino also developed a detailed cosmology. On the outside of the universe is a super-celestial and unitary God associated with Uranus. Below is the Cosmic Mind, Nous, which is a purely intelligible and supercelestial realm that is like God in being incorruptible and stable, but which is unlike him in being multiple, containing ideas and intelligences and angels that are the prototypes of what exists in the lower zone. This realm is associated with Saturn, and is what the four men in *Love's Labour's Lost* want. There was another tradition that associated the planet Saturn with melancholy—which held that the wise should therefore be depressed. Beneath the Cosmic Mind is the Cosmic Soul, anima mundana, a realm of pure causes rather than of pure forms, and associated with Jupiter, followed by a realm of Nature, a compound of form and matter, and finally a chaotic realm of Matter alone, which is formless and lifeless. Matter and Nature—every human being, beast, plant or mineral—are influenced by one or more of the celestial bodies and are governed by fate.

Ficino and his followers found an analogous structure within the microcosm of man's soul, which they said consisted of five

faculties grouped under the headings of anima prima, the Higher Soul, and anima secunda, the Lower Soul. Anima prima is composed of Mind and Reason. Mind is contemplative and creative. It is analogous to, and participates in, the Divine Mind. It can look upwards to the super-celestial and downward to Reason. Reason, which is closer to the lower soul, coordinates sense data according to the rules of logic. In contrast with the Lower Soul, it can either permit itself to be carried away by the lower sensations and emotions or struggle to surmount them. Anima secunda, the Lower Soul, lives in close contact with the body and consists of the three faculties that both direct and depend on physiological functions. The first is the faculty of propagation, nourishment, and growth, the second the faculty of external perception—the five senses, and the third the faculty of interior perception, or imagination. The Lower Soul, which is not free to make choices, is governed by the conjunction of celestial bodies and fate. Reason was seen as peculiar to man alone. Its practical efforts were associated with Jupiter, its contemplative efforts with Saturn.

To the celestial and earthly Venuses discussed in Plato's *Symposium* and in Ficino's writing, Pico della Mirandola adds a third, who is an intermediary between the two. In Pico's mythology Aphrodite Urania I is the daughter of Uranus and takes a human being from the particular to the universal, from individual to

divine love. Aphrodite Urania II, the figure he adds, is the daughter of Saturn and tries to make individual love rational and compatible with the active life. Aphrodite Pandemos represents lust and is the daughter of Zeus and Dione.

W. W. Auden
pages 36-37

Perhaps no one could say it better. Auden also refers to old traditions of courtly love and Plato's *Symposium*, which Ficino had carefully expounded, though Auden does not mention this. Of course the four pairs of lovers get together at the play's close, with the women fully in charge. Perhaps they have spent more time reading Ficino. The men, for their prolonged foolishness, vow to maintain a year's celibacy, after which their beloveds will be waiting.

We will not compete with Auden in discussing Ficino and *Love's Labour's Lost*. The rest of this chapter will be our own study of another comedy, far better known, the ever-popular *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare returns to familiar territory in this comedy: twins long separated, each believing the other dead, then unknowingly coming together in the same city to cause endless layers of confusion. These twins are male and female, Sebastian and Viola, and the confusion becomes more rampant because Viola chooses to dress as a young man, another Shakespeare favorite. We are not exactly sure why. The city is Illyria, which requires a shoreline. Sebastian was separated from his twin sister at age thirteen. We do not know how many years have passed, but ten would be a respectable guess. They are both confident young adults, no matter what attire they might be wearing.

Shakespeare likes storms at sea. We do not know if he ever crossed the English Channel, but he liked storms at sea. As a poet, this allowed him at his best—only consider the opening to *The Tempest*. *Twelfth Night* has two storms, both required to get the play started. Each storm washes a different twin ashore at Illyria, where inevitably they must get back together. Each twin thinks the other has suddenly come back from the dead, another favorite Shakespeare twist, which always reminds the magic scholar of that famed god-making passage in *Asklepius*. Two weddings promptly result. This will be a happy ending, much happier than the play Auden writes on. Finally, two comic characters, Sir Toby and Maria, also wed, with the Bard again habitually tying up loose ends. Only Malvolio leaves the stage hurt and suffering, and this may continue.

Why so much emphasis on the plot? We might at times have sounded like an outline series, but we have our reasons. A keynote of the occult is the seemingly miraculous bringing together of disparate parts or people from disparate places. The Magus, like Prospero, waves his magic wand and these things happen. Consider all the many extraordinary coincidences in *Twelfth Night*, far more than our summary. Of course Shakespeare is the unseen Prospero pulling the strings, and no doubt grandly enjoying himself, but with so many strings and so many tugs in so many directions, the reader's suspension of belief might strongly require a touch of magic, a gentle blend of occult forces weaving a wondrous comedic tapestry, some solid nudge of the supernal.

Brief passages throughout the play indicate Shakespeare keenly had this in mind. A theme moving throughout is music, starting with the play's famed opening lines, spoken by Orsino. Orsino is deeply, hopelessly in love with Olivia, and he hopes

various musical strains can take away his appetite. “If music be the food of love, play on. / Give me excess of it that, surfeiting / The appetite may sicken and so die.” Ficino has already told us music is the most powerful of the magical arts. A reverent believer in the harmony of the spheres, Ficino believes earthbound imitations of that holy music enters the human person through the ear with no interruption—the emphasis is on that lack of interruption. Orsino agrees with this concept when he comments, “So full of shapes is fancy / That it alone is high fantastical.” Love and music will be powerful entities in this play. In Act Three, Olivia will echo this belief, “I had rather hear you to solicit that / Than music from the spheres.” Act Three, Scene One, lines 108-109. She is addressing her heart-throb Viola, in male attire. Love and music, their magic powers, have flown together again.

References to astrology appear several times, not unusual in a Shakespeare play. Certain astrological signs were connected with specific body parts. Ficino knew this when he practiced astrological thinking. Shakespeare’s comic characters, Sir Andrew and Sir Toby—and one wonders what kingdom would have allowed these clowns to be knights—fumble badly when discussing astrological medicine. Sir Toby asks, “were we not born under Taurus?” Sir Andrew, as always, is quick with the response, “Taurus? That’s sides and heart.” Sir Toby is nothing if not disagreeable, “No, Sir, it is legs and thighs.” Act One, Scene Three, lines 130-136. These two are talking nonsense and the audience knows this—hence the comedy.

Later in Act Two, Scene Three, Sir Andrew speaks more astrological nonsense, “In sooth, thou wast in very gracious fooling last night, when thou spoke of Pigromitus, of the Vapians passing the equinoctial of Queubus.” Of course Sir

Toby is the listener and no doubt nods intelligently while the audience laughs.

Sebastian has suffered, and receives no respite till near the play's close. In Act One, Scene Five, he laments his cruel fate to his heroic friend Antonio, and places considerable blame on the stars, "My stars shine darkly over me. The malignancy of my fate might perhaps distemper yours, therefore I shall crave of you your leave that I may bear my evils alone," lines 2-5. Malvolio ultimately has more problems than any character, but when he does not yet know the trap he is walking into, he twice thanks his stars in a single speech, "I thank my stars ... my stars be praised." Act Two, Scene Five, lines 164-167. These would be brief laugh lines by a fine actor before a knowing audience.

Malvolio's minor problem is jesting about Pythagoras from the clown Feste. Malvolio avoids Feste's verbal tap about transmigration, a Pythagorean belief, the only trap the poor steward will avoid. Feste makes a lot of noise but Malvolio has not fallen. Another joke has been made about spiritual matters.

FESTE

What is the opinion of Pythagoras
concerning wildfowl?

MALVOLIO

That the soul of our grandma
might haply inhabit a bird.

FESTE

What thinkest thou of his opinion?

MALVOLIO

I think nobly of the soul, and no
way approve his opinion.

FESTE

Fare thee well. Remain thou still in
darkness. Thou shalt hold th'
opinion of Pythagoras ere I will
allow of thy wits, and fear to kill
a woodcock lest thou dispossess the
soul of thy grandma. Fare thee well.

Twelfth Night
Act Four, Scene Two
lines 50-60

On two occasions, Shakespeare refers to major themes in his sonnet cycle. Viola, disguised as Cesario, urges Olivia to reproduce.

VIOLA

'Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white
Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on.
Lady, you are the cruell'st she alive
If you will lead these graces to the grave
And leave the world no copy.

Twelfth Night
Act One, Scene Five
lines 228-232

Olivia gives a harsh negative response—she is four acts away from meeting Sebastian—but this particular request is the strong pleading request of Shakespeare's opening fourteen sonnets to the young man. Olivia of course is played by a young man. In Act Five, Scene One, the gender confusion is

reminiscent of Shakespeare's sonnet 20, the famed master-mistress poem. Orsino clearing his head as to which character he shall love and marry, refers to Viola as—at last—Viola, "You shall from this time be /Your master's mistress," line 303-304. Olivia, also getting the genders straight, next kindly tells Viola, "A sister, you are she," line 324.

The wedding vows blend with common alchemical imagery, but we have played the magic hand far enough. The details on the tapestry are interesting, often funny, but the finely woven magical strands are the plot and its slow careful development, both to characters and audience, perhaps also to Shakespeare while setting down scene by scene.

Chapter Forty-five:

The Magic of Ancient Egypt—Antony and Cleopatra

Of course a substantial part of *Antony and Cleopatra* takes place in ancient Egypt, home of Thrice-Great Hermes, the land where Elizabethans would have believed this wondrous priest-magus set down his magical teachings. *Antony and Cleopatra* does contain several magical or occult passages which could derive or be inspired by Ficino's *Hermetica*, or that same work by another unknown English translator. We could wrap all this up into a neat tidy package because of the combined Egyptian motif, but we do not wish to do so.

Like any astute Elizabethan, Shakespeare did know the basics of astrology and alchemy, the Neo-Platonic hierarchy, often called the chain of being in a far less spiritual sense, and the microcosm-macrocosm relationship in an ever-alive cosmos, and he places these factors in essential sections of *Antony and Cleopatra*. We are careful to assert no proof can possibly exist that he had a well-thumbed copy of the *Hermetica* at his desk while he wrote. But Ficino was the grandfather, or perhaps the vital great-grand father, of all these materials. That these factors loomed so large in Elizabethan thought, and so many plays by

Shakespeare, must be attributed to the powerful, sustained start given by Ficino, who not only made them well-known but provided them an intense respectability. The medieval magus hid in dark closets, an appalling sin-soaked figure to most of Christian society. It was Ficino who first brought him out into the clear golden sunlight of a safe, approved Christian dawn.

Hence the occult-magical knowledge required to attend a performance of *Antony and Cleopatra* was commonplace. We can be assured this audience would have understood the various images we will be discussing. If we have labored this point, our reason is because of its essential nature, which will apply to this Shakespearean play and so many others.

Shakespeare provides an offshoot of Neo-Platonic theology of the soul, when Antony and the Soothsayer converse privately together in Act One, Scene Three. In *Julius Caesar*, the Soothsayer has but one line, “Beware the Ides of March.” The Soothsayer with Antony does considerable talking. Antony is in Rome, having left with deep regrets his beloved Cleopatra back in Egypt. The nameless Soothsayer has made the same journey—he never says why—and also regrets his departure. If you regret leaving, Antony pointedly asks, often a master of direct questions, then whatever did you leave for. The Soothsayer, not surprisingly, responds with an evasive answer, “I see it in my motion, have it not in my tongue. / But yet hie you in Egypt again,” lines 12-13. Antony cannot be startled about a prediction of his return to Egypt, which of course means a dramatic romantic reuniting with the glorious Cleopatra. So far he might like what the Soothsayer is telling him. But Antony is a very difficult man to satisfy, and he promptly inquires, “whose fortunes shall rise higher—Caesar’s or mine?” line 15. The Caesar referred to is Octavius, later the first Roman

emperor called Augustus; he must not be confused with the Caesar murdered in 44 B.C. and a pivotal character in *Julius Caesar*.

The Soothsayer's six-line response is a mixture of Neo-Platonism and Pseudo-Dionysius. It is odd that Antony is not confused, for the audience might be.

SOOTHSAYER

Caesar's. Therefore, O Antony, stay not by his side.
Thy daemon, that thy spirit which keeps thee, is
Noble, courageous, high, unmatchable,
Where Caesar's is not. But near him thy angel
Becomes afeared, as being o'erpowered. Therefore
Make space enough between you.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Two, Scene Three

lines 16-21

The confusion might be avoided by considering daemon-spirit-angel as interchangeable terms. Combining Plotinus with Pseudo-Dionysius would make that both functional and possible. Clearly Shakespeare had read magical texts and valued them sufficiently to put them in his play. The deadly words prophesy—Antony might be the better soldier—certainly the better lover—but Octavius' spirit is much stronger, and this shall eventually doom Antony. Hence what matters most is the spiritual essence or force inside a person—both Plotinus and Porphyry would have liked that—is the determiner of destiny. The spiritual conquers the merely physical, though the physical often gives sadly obvious signs this shall eventually happen.

Antony is obviously distressed at what he hears. He has no trouble making solid clear sense of the trio of spiritual names

and promptly cries out, "Speak this no more," line 22. But the Soothsayer is far from finished talking. Seven more lines follow.

SOOTHSAYER

To none but thee; no more but when to thee.
If thou dust play with him at any game
Thou art sure to lose; and of that natural luck
He beats thee 'gainst the odds. Thy luster thickens
When he shines by. I say again, thy spirit
Is all afraid to govern thee near him;
But be away, 'tis noble.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Two, Scene Three
lines 22-28

Antony hears and understands. He can make but one response, "Get thee gone," line 29. The Soothsayer wisely departs. Shakespeare shows an excellent theatrical sense in removing him. The Soothsayer's warnings are short and swift, and thereby deeply penetrating. Neither Antony nor the audience needs a verbose, long-winded prophet.

Antony's next speech shows his complete encapturement by the soothsayer; he recalls superstitious events that seem to prove Octavius' spirit must always champion his, and he suddenly, like a sharp finger-snap, decides to return to Egypt.

ANTONY

be it art or hap,
He hath spoken true. The very dice obey him,
And in our sports my better cunning faints
Under his chance. If we draw lots, he speeds.

His cocks do win the battle still of mine
When it is all to nought, and his quails ever
Beat mine, inhooped, at odds. I will to Egypt;
And though I make this marriage for my peace,
I' th' East my pleasure lies.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Two, Scene Three

lines 30-38

Any audience member familiar with Plutarch will know Antony's tragic fate must occur in Egypt, for the play must move full circle, to end where it began.

The microcosm-macrocosm motif has a different structural meaning in *Antony and Cleopatra* than in many Shakespeare plays. When a country bumpkin says: the world is cracked for my love is fallen—this is obviously metaphor, perhaps effective, but wildly exaggerated. This exaggeration might not hold when dominant characters make similar statements in *Antony and Cleopatra*, because the enduring fate of the extensive Roman empire, including Egypt, is held in these characters' hands and guided by their wavering minds and passions. When Pompey makes a military attack on Rome, countless lives are involved. If he states: I juggle the world mightily—this might not be too great an exaggeration. If Pompey remained peaceful, the Roman empire would stay peaceful, and poets could not talk about a fragile uncertain world being juggled. It might be worth noting that Pompey, not a star character in the play, performs the action that obliterates peace; he causes far more desperate trouble than Antony's long overstayed sojourn in Egypt. The play focuses so much attention on Antony, Octavius, and Cleopatra that Pompey's role as instigator can often be overlooked.

Some of Antony's hair has turned white while he revels with his queen. He talks about his white hairs shaming his brown by his long absence from faithful necessary political-military duties in Rome, but he could have stayed in Egypt, unnoticed, unmissed, till all his hair turned white if Pompey, portrayed like an immature jealous teenager with a large club that he can't resist using against his betters, could have matured sufficiently to behave himself. But if he proclaims his club is darkening the noonday sky, his exaggeration might only be partial. It remained for Shakespeare to make such microcosmic statement into deeply unsettling, brilliant poetry.

Consider the five lines given to Octavia in Act Three, Scene Four. She is sister by her mother's side to Octavius, who has consented his beloved sister should wed the widower Antony, whose wife Fulvia has recently died. This marriage, obviously filled with high risk since the groom maintains his heart in Egypt, is intended to cement Octavius and Antony in bonds of eternal friendship. Lepidus, often overlooked, is the third member of Rome's famed triumvirate. How each acts can crack a world. The ill-fated marriage is very new when Antony and Octavius have a severe, irreparable falling out—the triumvirate is broken, cosmic metaphors are appropriate, and Octavia laments her inability to pray for either husband or brother. She apparently loves both, though the play's text makes it difficult to find what she could love in either. Then she delivers her crucial five lines, not overstated, far more poetic than the audience would have expected from her.

OCTAVIA

Thanks to my lord,
The Jove of power make me most weak, most weak,
Your reconciler! Wars 'twixt you twin would be

As if the world should cleave, and that slain men
Should solder up the rift.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Three, Scene Four

lines 28-32

This play often shows minor characters, like Octavia, making perceptive comments, using cosmic microcosmic imagery, about the major figures. Enobarbus, the loyal follower of Antony for four acts, provides this in Act One, Scene Two. Antony and Enobarbus stand alone together. Antony laments the insincerity of Cleopatra's varied, theatrical displays of emotion. But Enobarbus, always an admirer of the Egyptian queen, disagrees almost vehemently. He is a simple man who retorts in prose.

ENOBARBUS

Alack, sir no. Her passions are made of
nothing but the finest part of pure love.

We cannot call her winds and waters
and tears; they are greater storms and
tempests than almanacs can report.

This cannot be cunning in her; if it be,
she makes a shower of rain as well
as Jove.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act One, Scene Two

lines 138-143

Antony is not quite convinced, and utters the immediate response, "Would I had never seen her!" line 144.

But Antony should not be surprised at his subordinate's eloquent pleading. Soon after the play begins, he is wickedly

nagged by Cleopatra to express his love, which she feels must always be in strict competition with his duties as husband to Fulvia and key member of the Triumvirate. Antony grows impatient, and tries to calm her—with luck, shut her mouth—with a passage of cosmic imagery, not too far out of place for two such powerful characters.

ANTONY

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall. Here is my space.
Kingdoms are clay. Our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man. The nobleness of life
Is to do thus; when such a mutual pair
And such a twin can do't—in which I bind
On pain of punishment the world to weet—
We stand up peerless.

Antony and Cleopatra
Act One, Scene One
lines 35-42

The great man could never say it better, and yet Cleopatra, as usual, remains unsatisfied. She speaks privately to herself, “Excellent falsehood! / Why did he marry Fulvia and not love her? / I'll seem the fool I am not.” lines 43-45. She next speaks the cold mocking lines to her great love, “Antony will be himself,” lines 45-56.

Cleopatra starts the play this way, not allowing the finest microcosmic imagery to impress her. The play’s great sadness is she shall never be truly and fully satisfied with Antony, until the fourth act, when after his failed suicide, his mortally wounded body is slowly carried to her. Only then can she express the full force of her unyielding, undying love. She speaks the final words Antony shall hear in this life, watches his

lights fade out, and bursts forth in brief cosmic imagery, effective for being so brief.

CLEOPATRA

Noblest of men, woot die?
Hast thou no case of me? Shall I abide
In this dull world, which in thy absence is
No better than a sty?

(Antony dies)

O see, my women,
The crown o' th' earth doth melt. My lord!
O, withered is the garland of the war.
The soldier's pole is fall'n. Young boys and girls
Are level now with men. The odds is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon.

(She falls)

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Four, Scene Sixteen

lines 61-70

Recovering from her collapse from grief, she continues in her cosmic vein, “It were for me / To throw my scepter at the injurious gods, / To tell them that this world did equal theirs / Till they had stolen our jewel,” lines 77-80. Verse can never bring the microcosm and macrocosm any closer. Exaggeration? Antony was perhaps the most towering figure of his time, and Cleopatra had assumed legendary status by her teens when she seduces the aging Julius Caesar, not ever to be confused with Octavius. Not since Helen of Troy, perhaps fictional, had the ancient world ever beheld a more famous woman. For Antony and Cleopatra to meet and love, to love at high risk and even higher intensity, could be like two planets crashing together.

The explosion will enclose everything in its surroundings, and the poet shall search madly for metaphors.

The grieving Cleopatra provides these images in the final act, when she tells her Roman oppressor Dolabella about her wondrous dream of Antony. We quote this passage in full including Dolabella's brief confused responses, because the queen's sustained imagery is her valiant love song before death, because her verse captures not only her love but the tremendous political importance of Antony in a cosmic scheme and because the sharp deft language at last shows Cleopatra in full control of her speaking, no more wild, offsetting outbursts, but cosmic poetry pure and clear, for which Shakespeare's audience shall surely treasure and remember, even if Dolabella is too dense and wooden to grasp what he hears.

CLEOPATRA

I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony.
O, such another sleep, that I might see
But such another man!

DOLABELLA

If it might please ye—

CLEOPATRA

His face was as the heav'ns, and therein stuck
A sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted
The little O o' th' earth.

DOLABELLA

Most sovereign creature—

CLEOPATRA

His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
Crested the world. His voice was propertied
As all the tune's spheres, and that to friends;
But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,
There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas,
That grew the more by reaping. His delights
Were dolphin-like; they showed his back above
The element they lived in. In his livery
Walked crowns and crownets. Realms and islands were
As plates dropped from his pocket.

DOLABELLA

Cleopatra—

CLEOPATRA

Think you there was, or might be, such a man
As this I dreamt of?

DOLABELLA

Gentle madam, no.

CLEOPATRA

You lie, up to the hearing of the gods.
But if there be, or ever were one such,
It's past the size of dreaming. Nature wants stuff
To vie strange forms with fancy; yet t 'imagine
An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy,
Condemning shadows quite.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Five, Scene Two

lines 75-99

Cleopatra is not alone in her exalted estimate of Antony. Octavius utters a famous speech of more cosmic metaphors when he sadly learns of Antony's demise.

CAESAR

The breaking of so great a thing should make
A greater crack. The rived world
Should have shook lions into civil streets,
And citizens to their dens. The death of Antony
Is not a single doom; in that name lay
A moiety of the world.

Antony and Cleopatra
Act Four, Scene Sixteen
lines 14-19

Octavius utters the play's final lines after discovering the suicides of Cleopatra and her servant women. He orders the grand lovers to be buried together with much sanctimony. "No grave upon the earth shall clip in it a pair so famous." Act Five, Scene Two, lines 353-354. Octavius repeats what the lovers had known about themselves all the time. Pompey is dead, and the famed triumvirate holds but two leaders—hence an ever deepening crack must soon follow.

But the two great lovers believe their story continues after death in this troubled world. When Antony falsely believes his queen has died by her own hand, Act Four, Scene Fifteen, he states he must imitate her dying so his soul can catch up with her in an afterlife, far too vague to be connected with a specific belief system. Christians cannot hope for good things when they commit suicide. Perhaps noble Romans can, though they are usually far more concerned with their reputation left behind. Antony refers to Eros, for he will require this male subordinate's assistance to drive the heavy sword through his

master. Antony begins his verbal quest of the afterlife as soon as Eros leaves the stage. He is alone with his contemplation, and then calls for Eros.

ANTONY

I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra, and
Weep for my pardon. So it must be, for now
All length is torture. Since the torch is out,
Lie down, and stray no farther. Now all labour
Mars what it does; yea, very force entangles
Itself with strength. Seal, then, and all is done
Eros!—I come, my queen.—Eros!—stay for me.
Where souls do couch on flowers we'll hand in hand,
And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze.
Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops,
And all the haunt be ours. Come, Eros, Eros!

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Four, Scene Fifteen

line 44-54

Eros promptly re-enters. He will be obedient in all but taking his master's life. He asks, "What would my lord?" line 54. Antony replies with another series of personal cosmic imagery, not inappropriate since he feels himself to control one-third of the Roman world.

ANTONY

Since Cleopatra died
I have lived in such dishonour that the gods
Detest my baseness. I, that with my sword
Quarreled the world, and o'er green Neptune's back
With ships made cities, condemn myself to lack
The courage of a woman; less noble mind
Than she by which her death our Caesar tells
“I am conqueror of myself.”

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Four, Scene Fifteen

lines 55-62

Eros becomes the noble servant who kills himself with sword intended for his master. Antony, as we know, botches his own solitary suicide—he has botched so much for such a great man—and lives just long enough to die appropriately in his lover's arms.

With Antony truly dead, his queen can only join him by joining him in death. Again Shakespeare introduces the afterlife motif. Whether it applies to any but the very great, we of course do not know—but the queen knows, and her grand final speech is filled with this confident knowing.

CLEOPATRA

Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have
Immortal longings in me. Now no more
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.

(Charmian and Iras help her dress)

Yare, yare, good Iras, quick—methinks I hear
Antony call. I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act. I hear him mock

The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come.
Now to that name my courage prove my title.
I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life. So have you done?
Come then, and take the last warmth of my lips.

(She kisses them)

Farewell, kind Charmian, Iras, long farewell.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Five, Scene Two

lines 175-287

Iras falls and dies after a kiss of death from her queen. At once Cleopatra worries Iras shall encounter Antony first in the next life, leaving the queen an unacceptable all-too-distant second. The queen of Egypt's glory must get to her dying fast. If an aspic on her lips is not fast enough, she quickly applies one to her breast. She remains forever sensual. Charmian, the last of her favorites to die, has already responded to those overwhelming historic events in cosmic terms, "Dissolve, thick cloud, and rain, that I may say / The gods themselves do weep," lines 293-294. The queen is not only a gifted poet, but an inspiration of poetry in others. She calls herself base—like a base metal, a sad weak imitation of royal sunlike gold—because Iras has died before her.

CLEOPATRA

This proves me base.
If she first meet the curled Antony
He'll made demand of her, and spend that kiss
Which is my heaven to have.

(She takes an aspic from the basket
and puts it to her breast)

Come, thou mortal wretch,
With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate
Of life at once untie. Poor venomous fool,
Be angry, and dispatch. O, couldst thou speak,
That I might hear thee call great Caesar ass
Unpoliced.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Five, Scene Two

lines 195-303

She would not be Cleopatra if her final lines did not mix love and politics, the beloved Antony, the hateful Octavia.

Charmian, still a poet, responds, “O eastern star.” Her servant shall not allow her queen to remain base. Cleopatra’s last words show her strange mixing of death and motherhood, perhaps because only her dying can bring the new sacred life she requires.

CLEOPATRA

Peace, peace.

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
That sucks the nurse asleep?

CHARMIAN

O break! O break!

Anthony and Cleopatra

Act Five, Scene Two

lines 303-305

Whatever explanation, these are strange curious lines. Charmian thinks so by shouting, “O, break! O, break!” Charmian is not a character given to using exclamation points. Cleopatra finally calms herself—with Charmian’s aid—for what at long last must be her final utterances.

CLEOPATRA

As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle.
O Antony!

(She puts another aspic to her arm)

Nay, I will take thee too.

What should I stay—

(She dies)

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Five, Scene Two

lines 306-308

The famous line from *Hamlet* would be appropriate here: the rest is silence. But we need cover a few more matters that coincide with Ficino's possible grab basket of occult possibilities. The supernal shows in a strange music beneath the earth perceived by several unnamed soldiers in Act Four, all of Scene Three, lines 1-20. This music could be a portent: The battle next day will not go well for Antony; in this play, it never does.

Antony is not immune to occult beliefs. In the previous scene, he utters a long twenty-line lament about his sadly, unfolding fate, with a strong poignant allusion to astrology. We quote those lines.

ANTONY

He makes me angry,
And at this time most easy 'tis to do't,
When my good stars that were my former guides
Have empty left their orbs, and shot their fires
Into the' abyss of hell.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Three, Scene Thirteen

lines 145-149

Transmigration makes a brief comical appearance when Antony explains the crocodile's nature to the dull, gullible Lepidus, who would likely believe anything and so Antony joyously tells him anything. This quote is part of an extended prose passage, where Antony has fun with the gathered Romans with his tall tales of Egypt. This is welcome comedy in a play that has so little.

LEPIDUS

What manner o' thing is your crocodile?

ANTONY

It is shaped, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth. It is just so high as it is, and moves with its own organs. It lives by that which nourisheth it, and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Two, Scene Seven
lines 40-44

Alchemy, the Hermetic art, briefly enters the play, when Cleopatra responds to Alexas' appearance. The philosopher's stone can turn base metals to gold. Alexas, the base metal, has a slight touch of medicinal gold from being near Antony.

CLEOPATRA

How much unlike art thou Mark Antony!
Yet, coming from him, that great medicine hath
With his tinct gilded thee. How goes it
With my brave Mark Antony?

Antony and Cleopatra
Act One, Scene Five
lines 35-38

A modern audience might not recognize the alchemical allusion, but Elizabethans were surrounded by numerous treatises and pamphlets on alchemy. Cleopatra's complex Hermetic metaphor would have struck home.

We have discussed—in other chapters—the key section in the *Hermetica* that enthusiastically applauds the poetic imagination that can list one fresh original image after another. After all Antony's military and political hopes have decisively failed, he utters a passage to the ever loyal Eros that would have deeply pleased *Hermetica*. We can only quote it, let our reader decide, and move quickly on.

ANTONY

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A towered citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't that nod unto the world
And mock our eyes with air. Thou hast seen these signs;
They are black vesper's pageants.

Antony and Cleopatra

Act Four, Scene Fifteen
lines 3-9

Eros, not quite certain what he has heard, promptly agrees, "Ay, my lord." This allows Antony, with only an audience of one, to continue for three more lines.

ANTONY

That which is now a horse even with a thought
The rack disdains, and makes it indistinct
As water is in water.

Antony and Cleopatra
Act Four, Scene Fifteen
lines 9-11

Eros again responds, "It does, my lord." Antony moves this vivid cluster of images on to the larger issue of uncertainty of his own identity. He is a badly confused man—at this perilous moment, he can trust neither Rome nor Cleopatra. He certainly no longer trusts himself, and this might hold true since he first felt the beauteous magic of Egypt's dynamic queen. He has played for empires and lost. He can only get his noble self back, amid many pages of splendid poetry, by his soul's transformation in the next life, a change that shall far outpass the wonders of soothsayers or alchemy.

Chapter Forty-six:

The Doomed Talkers—Richard II, Faustus and Hamlet

The World Soul never rests, and neither do the humans living within it. Ficino's six volumes of *Platonic Theology* consider this an essential point of cosmic creation. Each human possesses an eternal soul, and that soul is seldom stable as it moves up and down the ladder centering in the World Soul, with the ladder as metaphor for the human soul's three cosmic locations: 1.) earthly, or lowest, where the incessant conflicts with dark demons and sensual temptations occur; 2.) the celestial or intermediate realm, upward from earth, attained only by creatures with souls, thereby leaving out the multitudes of animal creatures, where the soul can attain God's realm up above or crash back down to earth and start the process again, and 3.) the highest supercelestial realm, ancient Greek or Platonic in origin, where the soul arrives free of all imperfections for an eternal stay. These three realms can be found in Agrippa's lengthy, three volume encyclopedia on occult philosophy, but Ficino was there a half century before with his three stepping stones to eternity. Ficino would be the first to admit two millennium had passed since "the divine Plato

had given this World Soul and supernal three-tiered concept an eternal beginning.

What matters in discussing Elizabethan drama is only the human can function on all three levels; when the levels connect or yank apart, magic would be an appropriate word. Angels lack bodies, and so thrive on the top two levels, but have little use on earth, regardless of several favorite scriptural stories. Elizabethan plays can overlap Ficino's cosmos with the Christian heaven-hell; in either case the character is caught in-between, torn from one level to another, always afraid because of the eternal consequences of his actions, with dramatic shifts and turns often taking place within a few spoken lines, a single line.

Hearts are torn apart by conflicts between heaven and hell, Mount Olympus and Hades, the peace-free conscience and the overwhelming doubts and fears. Interior monologues—often called dramatic soliloguys—work well with this. The characters do not debate the Copernican system versus the geocentric, nor Aristotle's science versus Erasmus. They do not stand at debating podiums, nodding at pros and cons of well-worded intellectual gifts. They speak well—often in words that have become an important part of our language—but they debate the inner forces of the cosmos, those three tiers, and their own undying relation to them. The character lives in a strange world where values of Ficino, the Christians, and the darkest powers of magic intersect. If dark magic derives from rehearsed practices pleasing to Satan (or Beelzebub or Mephistophilis), then white magic can be fervent prayers to God's angels, usually derived from Pseudo-Dionysius, (circa 300 A.D.), the unquestioned text of angel lore throughout the Renaissance. What results is a character with a wild and whirling eclectic

way of thinking—to separate and divide can lose emotive power, original outbursts can heighten conflicted power plus the staggering effect on another character.

In three Elizabethan plays, the principal character's soliloquies—or mad ramblings when others are too confused to understand—reveal most about this protagonist and drive the plot relentlessly forward. Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Richard II are great talkers, whether or not anyone is listening, and this also holds true of Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, whose near non-stop dialogues dominate his play. In effect, all three characters dominate their plays by their solitary struggles on Ficino's three-tiered hierachic ladder. Other characters get moved about, quite considerably, but the dramatic action would come to a standstill without the ever talking protagonist. In Richard II's case, the play might have taken several opposite directions if only he could have stopped talking—and it is with this character we shall start.

King Richard II is not an astute nor pragmatic political thinker. His English nation faces a rebellious Ireland. Shakespeare's audience is unaware when the play opens of Richard's severe Irish problem. But the king knows, perhaps a half hour before the audience. Richard spends that time mismanaging his national finances and expelling Henry Bolingbroke, who gathers many other angry, disgruntled nobles to challenge Richard's crown. Richard avoids these mounting problems by leading men to Ireland, only to return to England when his neglected challenges there turn near catastrophic. What to do? Whatever actions Richard takes must be swift and decisive, but this is where his character breaks down. He begins talking, perhaps not in soliloquys because other characters stand about him, but he talks as an audience of one, enchanted with

his own poetic gifts, confusing his places on the bottom two tiers of Ficino's hierarchy.

Richard's return speech commences in Act Three, Scene Two.

KING RICHARD (He touches the ground)

Dear earth, I do salute thee with my hand,
Tough rebels warn thee with their horses' hoofs.
As a long-parted mother with her child
Plays fondly with her tears, and smiles in meeting,
So, weeping, smiling, greet thee my earth,
And do thee favours with my royal hands.
Feed not thy sovereign's foe, my gentle earth,
And do thee favours with my royal hands.
Feed not thy sovereign's foe, my gentle earth,
Nor with thy sweets comfort his ravenous sense;
But let the spiders that soak up thy venom
And heavy-gaited toads lie in their way,
Doing annoyance to the treacherous feet
Which with usurping steps do trample thee.
Yield stinging nettles to mine enemies,
And when they from thy bosom pluck a flower
Guard it, I pray thee, with a lurking adder,
Whose mortal tongue may with a mortal touch
Throw death upon thy sovereign's enemies. —
Mock not my senseless conjurations, lords.
The earth shall have a feeling, and these stones
Prove armed soldiers, ere her native king
Shall falter under foul rebellion's arms.

Richard II

Act Three, Scene Two

lines 6-26

He is at the bottom of the hierarchy, but this does not seem to bother him. He is performing, with himself as the only appreciative audience. His king's sacred connection with the earth will not stop the ever-gathering arms of Henry Bolingbroke, soon to be King Henry IV.

Richard's next speech (lines 32-58) move him effortlessly—speech is effortless—to Ficino's middle ties. He believes himself the sun-king, Hermetic rather than Copernican, and when he makes his metaphoric appearance Bolingbroke's forces are doomed. This is cosmic language, "searching eye of heaven is hid behind the globe that lights the lower world ... But when from under this terrestrial ball / He fires the proud tops of the eastern pines / And darts his light through every guilty hole."

KING RICHARD

Discomfortable cousin, know'st thou not
That when the searching eye of heaven is hid
Behind the globe, that lights the lower world,
Then thieves and robbers range abroad unseen
In murders and in bloody outrage here;
But when the terrestrial ball
He fires the proud tops of the eastern pines,
And darts his light through every guilty hole,
Then murders, treasons, and detested sins,
The cloak of night being plucked from off their backs,
Stand bare and naked, trembling at themselves?
So when this thief, this traitor, Bolingbroke hath pressed
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel. Then if angels fight,

Weak men must fall; for heaven still guards the right.

Richard II

Act Three, Scene Two

lines 32-58

This is an essential focus into the mind of Richard. The lines might work as verse, perhaps brilliantly so—he is not dull to listen to—but not as military strength. A vivid metaphor cannot be turned into a single soldier. Richard continues his illusionary thinking: (line 81) “It not the King’s name forty thousand names?” In truth, the king’s name is one name. How much does Richard believe in his own poeticizing? Does he truly expect angels to wield swords in his behalf? Perhaps—but as the play continues and Richard keeps talking, something else appears to be at issue.

Richard’s goal isn’t to win battles or preserve his monarchy, but to talk. He’s a king who would rather be a poet, and when his political problems turn impossible, he concentrates solely on the latter. Ficino’s world becomes a fine world for a poet who doesn’t have time to think out a belief-system of his own. In Act Three, Scene Two, (lines 140-173), Richard gives a miniature solo performance of the multitude of tragedies that can befall a king, with himself never leaving center stage. He concentrates on the poetic earthiness: “write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.” He enters virtuoso poetry with his personification of Death.

KING RICHARD

For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court; and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,

To monarchize, he feared, and ill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which falls about our life
Were brass impregnable; and humored thus,
Comes at the last, and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall; and farewell, king.
Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence.

Richard II

Act Three, Scene Two
lines 156-169

This is a speaker seeking rich resources of language rather than solutions to political crises.

In Act Three, Scene Three, he tells Northumberland:

KING RICHARD

Yet know my master, God omnipotent,
Is mustering in his clouds on our behalf
Armies of pestilence; and they shall strike
Your children yet unborn and unbegot,
That lift your vassal hands against my head
And threat the glory of my precious crown.

Richard II

Act Three, Scene Three
lines 84-89

Richard would seem to assert again his supernal powers of royalty. But at Richard's next meeting with Northumberland, but a few minutes later, the sad poet of personal tragedy has returned; he uses an Hermetic imagination to catalogue the enforced changes he shall undergo.

KING RICHARD

What must the king do now? must he submit?
The king shall do it. Must he be desposed?
The king shall be contented. Must he lose
The name of king? A God's name, let it go.
I'll give my jewels for a set of beads,
My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,
My gay apparel for an almsman's gown,
My figured goblets for a dish of wood,
My scepter for a palmer's walking staff,
My subjects for a pair of carved saints,
And my large kingdom for a little grave,
A little, little grave, an obscure grave;
Or I'll be buried in the king's highway,
Some way of common trade where subjects' feet
May hourly trample on their sovereign's head,
For on my heart they tread now, whilst I live,
And buried once, why not upon my head?
Aumerle, thou weep'st, my tender-hearted cousin.
We'll make foul weather with despised tears.
Our sighs and they shall lodge the summer corn,
And make a dearth in this revolting land.
Or shall we play the wantons with our woes,
And make some pretty match with shedding tears;
And thus to drop them still upon one place
Till they have fretted us a pair of graves
Within the earth, and therein laid? There lies
Two kinsman digged their graves with weeping eyes.
Would not this ill do well? Well, well, I see
I talk but idly and you mock at me.

Richard II
Act Three, Scene Three
lines 141-170

The Hermetic imagination can be a listing or catalogue of sights only available to inspired imaginations as described in *Hermetica* on several occasions. Knowledge of *Hermetica* is not required for Richard's outburst, but it would have taught him the eager jumping from place to place, image to image. Moreso, Richard believes objects pertaining to his kingship do hold special supernal powers, hence entering his verse outburst into the realm of magic. He is assured of his own sacredness, required for white magic, when he compares his sad fate to Jesus and all his opponents to a massive collection of Judases. He also compares himself to the tragic rider of "glist'ning Phaeton," another sun image (Act Three, Scene Three, line 177).

We need to pause in our discussion of Richard II to show magic was not far from Shakespeare's mind. A nameless Welsh Captain, upon thinking Richard dead, speaks the supernal world of magical omens, followed by Salisbury, a prominent noble and thereby several classes higher. Salisbury's images are more cosmic, not forgetting the majesty of fallen kingship. We quote both in full.

WELSH CAPTAIN

'tis thought the King is dead. We will not stay.
The bay trees in our country are all withered,
And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven.
The pale-faced moon looks bloody on the earth,
And lean-looked prophets whisper fearful change.
Rich men look sad, and ruffians dance and leap;
The one in fear to lose what they enjoy,
The other to enjoy by rage and war.
These signs forerun the death or fall of kings.
Farewell. Our countrymen are gone and fled,
As well assured Richard their king is dead.

SALISBURY

Ah, Richard! With the eyes of heavy mind
I see thy glory, like a shooting star,
Fall to the base earth from the firmament.
The sun sets weeping in the lowly west,
Witnessing storms to come, woe, and unrest.
Thy friends are fled to wait upon they foes,
And crossly to thy good all fortune goes.

Richard II

Act Two, Scene Four

lines 7-24

These lines give weight to Bishop of Carlisle's prophesy in Act Four, Scene One.

BISHOP OF CARLISLE

And, if you crown him, let me prophesy
The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for this foul act.

Richard II

Act Four, Scene One

lines 137-129

This historic drama will have an ending, but not a happy one.

When Richard must turn over his crown to Bolingbroke, Act Four, Scene One, he talks endlessly about his past glories. His personal melodrama reaches the point of requesting a mirror, staring with broken heart at the sun-clad face of his lost power, and shattering the mirror. To what purpose? He gains sympathy from no one. The stronger his poetry, the weaker his character. Richard ekes out the last possible tear in parting from his Queen, who will be sent to a French convent, not the worst of fates, unlike her husband, who is taken to a prison tower.

Richard often wants others to talk about the sad deaths of kings. He will now be stabbed to death in his cell, though he does stop talking long enough to fight back, killing two. His best moment in the play is his leaving it.

But he has talked too much, held the stage too long. From his prison cell, he speaks a soliloquy of sixty-five lines. Act Five, Scene Fifty-five, lines 1-65. Hamlet never came close to talking this long, and he had far more to say. Richard compares himself to the grand world in an unconvincing microcosmic conceit—it would be unlike Richard, if he should be convincing—he next compares himself to a prisoner in the public stocks, almost enjoying how far he's fallen, and tries his verbal gifts with an extended musical metaphor, comparing the tick-tock of the performed music—music of the spheres, no doubt—to his lingering moments on this lowest earthly tier. He runs out of language at about the time he runs out of life.

Why does this historical play by Shakespeare persist in holding our interest? The answer must be Richard. No other character holds a chance of sustaining our interest, so what it all comes down to is Richard, but not as king or general or politician, but Richard as poet—and this is where Richard can pull and tear at our heartstrings. He is often a good poet, very often an excellent one, but seldom do his long speeches reach the greatness of Hamlet or Faustus, and in this lies all the poignancy, pain, and frustration of his tragedy. Richard rises or falls as a poet. He has remarkable verbal skills. He reaches us; we often tear our own hair out at wanting him to slow down or shut up. But he keeps talking—his tragedy, what's so compelling about him, is he comes so close. Hamlet and Faustus die after spouting many verse masterpieces. Richard doesn't quite achieve this and yet we so want him to.

Perhaps Richard's problem is the Ficino-Christian world he lives in. He's accosted, like so many Shakespeare characters, by so many conflicting and overlapping worlds to believe in. Richard is a microcosm and a believer in Christ; he can't quite be both, and the fence-straddling might cost him poetic powers. He talks about the help of angels, but he lists them almost as an afterthought; so does he truly believe? That might be the core of his problem and a problem for Elizabethans following Scripture and Ficino—what do they truly believe? The Catholic-Protestant wars have erupted. Galenists still debate Paracelsus. Who put the sun in the center of the cosmos: Copernicus or Thrice-Great Hermes? Or maybe ol' Ptolemy had gotten it right after all? How to know? How to take even the first steps towards knowing—and here lies Richard's dilemma, a rather ordinary man with sometime extraordinary verbal gifts somehow elevated to the kingship. That cannot be a formula for lasting success. But we sense Richard's political chaos from the opening act. All that's left for us is to root for him as a poet. If only he'd immersed himself in Ficino and discarded all else—the king as magus—if only he'd been Prospero—if only he'd been Puck.

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is the Elizabethan play most heavily steeped in dark magic, or what might happen if all Ficino's warnings and misgivings about the Neo-Platonic magic cosmos fail to take heed. Marlowe's play was composed most probably in 1592, the year before his death by a vicious stabbing with a heavy full-length sword in a barroom brawl and before Shakespeare would achieve his first notable success with *Romeo and Juliet* (to be discussed later) in 1593. Marlowe was ambitious and liked being in the public eye, and it could almost be said that he died similarly to his protagonist Faustus.

Faust dominates the stage like few characters in Elizabethan drama, and when facing the audience, he's talking, often in soliloquy, but talking, with long set speeches of exciting hair-raising verse about his battle between God and Mephistophilis, the follower of Lucifer. That Faustus might not be given a fair shake is indicated by God's lack of a subordinate angel of equal capacity to combat Mephistophilis for Faust's soul. A character identified only as Man attempts to advise, but he lacks supernal import, though his well-meaning interest is touching. All this results in Faust's harrowing loneliness as he battles for his soul, with his emotions violently whirled about him, and no firm place to stand.

What Marlowe accomplishes is an everyman caught up in the battle all must fight. Faust's overreaching desires are all too human: boundless knowledge, a knack of playing practical jokes on stuffed shirts (papists would not have liked their pontiff wearing such a puffy shirt), and erotic joys with beautiful women. Faust's goals are almost reasonably human, though on the exaggerated scale of Galileo and Casanova. He has no desires to be Attila the Hun or conquer Alexander. He never shows any signs that he wishes to get his clothes dusty or his hands dusty. Like Richard II, what he enjoys is the sound of this own voice.

After a Chorus introduces the play, indicating Faust's magical goals have caused him to fly too close to the sun like Icarus—already the theme of man overreaching his grasp has been set down—and connects this well-known image with, “Nothing so sweet as magic is to him.” Faustus is next discovered in his study. His opening scene: the lengthy works of Aristotle, common fare for the university student of Faust's time, have far from enthralled him. What to do? His mind will

always be working toward a full and intense satisfaction, and the audience always knows this. For the play to succeed, he had better be an excellent talker.

Faust next ponders the occult study of alchemy, "heap up gold—wondrous cur." But the alchemist requires a long, ever so slow process in his lab, and Faust might lack the patience for this. Galen's works leave too many ponderings unanswered. Faust wants it all, and he wants it now. He is satisfied with neither the church nor Scripture. Yet his lengthy soliloquy does not leave the audience uncomfortably curious at Faust's ultimate goal. He wants white magic, the height of power, and his final lines convey this. All quotations from *Dr. Faustus* (and all Marlowe's works in previous chapters) are from the standard Everyman edition, which does not contain acts, scenes, or lines, and so will be identified by page number.

FAUSTUS

These metaphysicians of magicians,
And necromantic books are heavenly;
Lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters;
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.
O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promis'd to the studious artisan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command: emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind, or rend the clouds;
But his dominion that exceeds in this,
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man;

A sound magician is a mighty god:
Here, Faustus, try thy brains to gain a deity.

Dr. Faustus

Everyman edition: 1967
page 122

Next, for a few moments, a Good Angel and Bad Angel fight for Faust's soul, which must be still up for grabs. But Faustus reverts to *Hermetica*, not scripture. *Hermetica* teaches the would-be magus to employ his imagination to travel anywhere and everywhere, to do and see anything. Faustus resulting speech is a superb example of the Hermetic example at work. Faust will give others. So will several characters in Shakespeare. We quote this one with Faust alone on stage.

FAUSTUS

How am I glutted with conceit of this!
Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please,
Resolve me of all ambiguities,
Perform what desperate enterprise I will?
I'll have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all the corners of the new-found world,
For pleasant fruits and princely delicacies;
I'll have them read me strange philosophy,
And tell the secrets of all foreign kings;
I'll have them wall all Germany with brass,
And make swift Rhine circle fair Wertenberg;
I'll have them fill the public schools with silk,
Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad;
I'll levy soldiers with the coin they bring,
And chase the Prince of Parma from our land,
And reign sole king of all our provinces;

Yea, stranger engines for the brunt of war,
Than was the fiery keel at Antwerp's bridge,
I'll make my servile spirits to invent.

Dr. Faustus

Everyman edition: 1967

page 123

The intensity of Faust's desires are shown in the next scene when he discusses magic with two friends who know the subject. Faust says, "tis magic, magic, that have ravish'd me." A man usually speaks that way about a woman, but not Faust. Valdes follows with another Hermetic catalogue of wonders, tempting Faust all the more about controlling his part of the cosmos. Cornelius then gives a definition of magic's glory, if anyone still required it.

CORNELIUS

The miracles that magic will perform
Will make thee vow to study nothing else,
He that is grounded in astrology,
Enrich'd with tongues well seen in minerals,
Hath all the principles magic doth require:
Then doubt not, Faustus, but to be renown'd
And more frequented for this mystery
Than heretofore the Delphian oracle.
The spirits tell me they can dry the sea,
And fetch the treasure of all foreign wrecks,
Ay, all the wealth that our forefathers hid
Within the massy entrails of the earth:
Then tell me, Faustus, what shall we three want.

Dr. Faustus

Everyman edition: 1967

page 124

Faust's temptation scenes by Mephistophilis are almost anti-climatic. Faust has already uttered or listened to several hundred lines of verse that all proclaim the ceaseless splendors of magic's power, with several brief passages of Hermetic catalogues. Mephistophilis, the great tempter, had to do little more than show up and say, "sign here." Faust overlooks the one overpowering limit to his contract with Satan; he can only practice magic for twenty-four years, and then Satan takes his soul.

Midway through the play, Faustus overlooks this limitation. Twenty-four years no longer seems such a bargain for all eternity. He doesn't make specific comments about his soul, but both Ficino and Christian concepts require judgement after death. Faust has climbed to the upper rungs of earth's ladder but he shall climb no higher. He mentions Agrrippa's name, but never reaches that middle celestial realm. Hence he is vulnerable to demons, but can't expect much help from angels, even angels of the lowest order. The good and bad angels who frequently debate over him are but minor spirits, since neither can ever take the upper rank or persuade their solitary human audience. All these negative factors cause a long, sustained outbreak of fear and hope's impotence. He has many more sensual joys and pranks to devise, but after his following midpoint soliloquy, his terrors of his mounting doom never leave him.

FAUSTUS

My heart's so harden'd, I cannot repent:
Scarce can I name salvation, faith, or heaven,
But fearful echoes thunder in mine ears,
"Faustus, thou art damn'd!" then swords, and knives,
Poison, guns, halters, and envenom'd steel

Are laid before me to dispatch myself;
And long ere this I should have slain myself,
Had not sweet pleasure conquer'd deep despair.
Have I not made blind Homer sing to me
Of Alexander's love and OEnon's death?
And hath not he, that built the walls of Thebas
With ravishing sound of his melodious harp,
Made music with my Mephistophilis?
Why should I die, then, or basely despair!
I am resolv'd; Faustus shall ne'er repent—
Come, Mephistophilis, let us dispute again,
And argue of divine astrology.
Tell me, are there many heavens above the moon?
Are all celestial bodies but one globe,
As is the subject of this centric earth.

Dr. Faustus

Everyman edition: 1967

page 136

Faust still has time and he impresses an emperor, a horse dealer, and finally Helen of Troy who appears to him more a phantasm than human substance, though Faust can kiss her. Faust's meeting with Helen is responsible for his famous lines:

Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships?
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? —

But the clock of Faust's life hurries on, until finally he's standing alone on the stage, waiting his eternal fate. In truth, Faust has always been alone. No evidence exists of human friendship; he has no comparable relationship of Richard II and his Queen. Magic failed him because he only learned the dark magic emanating from hell. Critics are incorrect to claim Marlowe has written the definitive play on Renaissance magic.

Marlowe has fully neglected the white magic advocated by Ficino with poetry and vigor, that draws a person closer to God. Faust has no concept or notion of white magic, as best evidenced when he enters his final speech, a lengthy interior battle which begins when the clock strikes eleven. This soliloquy contains the finest writing in the play. Faust seeks hope from a Christian faith that he long ago lost trust in. His extended hands are empty. A rapidly-convulsive action takes over his words. He understands no prayerful technique from either Scripture or Ficino—the only third source in his era is Judaic—and his tragedy accumulates at the same sad furious pace his hope diminishes. Finally, Faust believed only in himself—he could never quite trust Lucifer or Christ—and his means are now found haplessly wanting. Hell is not the absence of God, but the start of the irrevocable process that begins that absence. A few passages suffice, soon after that internal clock has struck an hour from midnight.

FAUSTUS

The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd.
O' I'll leap up to my God!—who pulls me down?—
See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
One drop would save my soul, half a drop: ah, my
Christ!—
Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ!
Yet I will call on him: O, spare me, Lucifer!—
Where is it now? 'tis gone: and see, where God
Stretcheth out his arm, and bends his ireful brows!

Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!

Dr. Faustus

Everyman edition: 1967
page 157

The dreadful tickings of Faust's damning clock continue. It reaches half-past eleven. He is past hope. He has studied astrology and all wonders of the sky—Ficino's subjects—but receives no help now. His Hermetic traveling made a finger-snap take him from nation to nation, mountain stream to icy forge; yet now we cannot flee his impending fate. The greatest traveling magus of all finds his feet firmly fastened to earth, the only Ficinian realm Faust ever walked over. Richard II will be deeply mourned by his queen, a few noble hanger-ons, even the new king. Faust will leave no one behind to wipe a tear. Yet his greatest tragedy is he failed so miserably at what he tried so hard to succeed at: magic. He found only magic's dark sides—as exemplified by the Seven Deadly Sins when each performed a small tableau before him—and this dark side, for all its false glitter and rich garments, will inevitably only take the soul farther and inevitably farther from God. Faust's tragedy is he neither knew nor cared of Ficino's white magic, with all its specified reverent practices to lead the soul ever higher, ever closer to God. Marlowe's play is a classic, but it would be interesting if he let Mephistophilis and Ficino battle for Faust's soul. Since he did not, we are left with that breathtaking soliloquy of Faust's verse that closes the play. In this instance, it will do well to let the poor damned soul have the final words. Half past eleven:

FAUSTUS (the clock strikes the half hour)

Ah, half the hour is past! 'twill all be past anon.
O God,
If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,
Yet for Christ's sake, whose blood hath ransom'd me,
Impose some end to my incessant pain;
Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,
A hundred thousand, and at last be sav'd!
O, no end is limited to damned souls!
Why wert thou not a creature wanting soul?
Or why is this immortal that thou hast?
Ah, Pythagoras' metempsychosis, were that true,
This soul should fly from me, and I be chang'd
Unto some brutish beast! all beasts are happy,
For, when they die,
Their souls are soon dissolv'd in elements;
But mine must live still to be plagu'd in hell.
Curs'd be the parents that engender'd me!
No, Faustus, curse thyself, curse Lucifer
That hath depriv'd thee of the joys of heaven.

(The clock strikes twelve)

O, it strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn to air,
Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell!

(Thunder and lightning)

O soul, be chang'd into little water-drops,
And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found!

(Enter devils)

My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!
Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!
Ugly hell, gape not! come not, Lucifer!
I'll burn my books! —Ah, Mephistophilis!

(Exeunt Devils with Faustus)

Dr. Faustus

Everyman edition: 1967

pages 157-158

Hamlet's speeches, alone and otherwise, are among the most famous in English literature. If all he had to do was hold his audience by his words, he'd have gotten out of his difficulties. But Hamlet's problem was he had far too many problems—maternal murder and incest and no assured belief system so he can stand firmly long enough to catch his breath. He never does catch his breath, constantly running from scene to scene to find out what he might unsettle. His famed soliloquys are not long private musings, but bold speculative frenzies as he ponders all the eternal questions he can come up with before jumping back into the act. He does not speak from a hammock or rocking-chair. From his first encounter with the ghost—his own murdered father, killed by duplicity of his own mother—the Danish prince is like a dangerous explosive device with an ever shortened fuse line. He is going to go off—and then all bloody hell is going to happen. The only question is when, and that's what holds the audience to the edge of their seats, especially if seeing the play for the first time.

Hamlet's dire problem is compounded because he lives in a Christian world, where a person shall be judged on the content of his life in the hereafter, and yet with no special reverence at all to Christ or his mother. Ghosts happen. Hamlet's astonishment at the Ghost is not that such creatures do

exist—of course they do or Hamlet's comrades at the watch would all be taken as loonies—but the mind-boggling fact the Ghost is his much-loved father, now claiming to have been murdered in the most dire manner possible. Hamlet will never again have a quiet moment, and neither will the play.

Magic is not foreign to the play, nor to its Christian background. At the play's start, Act One, Scene One, three minor characters set major moods and belief systems in effect.

BARNARDO

It was about to speak when the cock crew.

HORATIO

And then it started like a guilty thing
Upon a fearful summons. I have heard
The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn,
Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat
Awake the god of day, and at this warning,
Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air,
The 'extravagant and erring spirit lies
To his confine; and of the truth herein
This present object made probation.

MARCELLUS

It faded on the crowing of the cock.
Some say that ever 'against that season comes
Wherein our saviour's birth is celebrated
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit can walk abroad,
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,

No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is the time.

Hamlet

Act One, Scene One
lines 124-145

This play will not be grounded in the firm reality that avoids omens, tragic coincidence, and supernal magic.

Set aside Hamlet's poetic utterances for a moment. In Act Two, Scene Two, lines 295-312, Hamlet encounters Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, whom have been invited by Queen Gertrude to find out what troubles her melancholy son. Hamlet will have nothing of this. He knows why they've been manipulated and resents it. He means to poke fun of them in his single prose speech. Hamlet begins by poking fun at Galen's traditional diagnosis of melancholy. By exaggerating the components of a traditional diagnosis of melancholy, resulting from an overbalance of the four humors, Hamlet satirizes the illness he is reputed to be suffering from. If his two listeners are left breathless and staggering, Hamlet's next remarks might knock them off their feet. Hamlet chose a key section from Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on Man*, a famous and most admired essay throughout the Renaissance. The marks of praise for individual body parts are what Hamlet has fun with. Like with Galen, by exaggeration, he blows up a gas balloon, then deftly pokes a hole in it. In a short prose speech, the Danish prince has triumphed over both Galen and Pico, as well as the royal couple who have crudely sent former friends to spy on him.

Hamlet can also enter the supernal realms that blend a strong pagan with a weak Christianity, as he stands alone on stage and prepares to face his mother.

HAMLET

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breaks out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature! Let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
Let me be cruel, not unnatural.
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites —
How in my words somever she be shent,
To give them seals never my soul consent.

Hamlet

Act Three, Scene Two

lines 376-388

Hamlet will make better speeches, but none where he is so close to acting. Yet he will and must hesitate, because his father the Ghost commanded that Gertrude be spared (Act One, Scene Five, 84-87). This remarkable forgiveness on the Ghost's part explains why Hamlet verbally takes leave of his senses when the Ghost departs. He needs lines 92-110 to attain control over his emotions, a control he will seldom be able to hold onto. Hamlet is never more spontaneously alive than in those eighteen lines. He has no moral grounding in Ficino or Scripture. The only two dominant belief systems fail to provide hope or guidance. The play shows the impossible ponderings of a prince with innate nobility but no secure set of values that transcend the here and now. If he was shrouded in Ficino's goodness, he might seek out other people like him and have a chance. A Christianity of token superstitious gestures, plus an afterlife that

could be Hades or hell, will not bide well. It is useful in feeling Hamlet's plight to quote those eighteen lines.

HAMLET

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
And shall I couple hell? O fie! Hold, hold, me heart,
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All sows of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain
Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, yes, by heaven.
A most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables,
My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile and smile and be a villain.
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark.

(He writes.)

So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word:
It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me.'
I have sworn't.

Hamlet
Act One, Scene Five
lines 92-110

Three scenes before this speech, and before Hamlet has conversed with the Ghost, he delivers his first famous soliloquy,

"O that this too too solid flesh would melt." Hamlet gives the powerfully poetic, emotion-laden release about his father's death and his mother's quick remarriage. He makes the meritable Hermetic linking of below and above, "Heaven and earth, must I remember?" He lives in a Christian country, but talks knowingly of Niobe and Hercules. He does not have a Christian saint, nor a Platonic wise man to hold onto. He has no friend other than Horatio whom he can trust; yet to no one dare he tell his mother's hideous crimes. It's not coincidence Hamlet speaks by soliloquy. He's a very lonely man. Richard II had the potential for friends, but he talked right by them. Faustus had friendly acquaintances, but cared only for himself. Unless the actor playing Hamlet is a very fat man, his solid flesh should melt if placed close enough to earth's fires, the only site of fire Hamlet shall know. He believes enough in a Supreme Being to avoid suicide, which he considers a solution to his multiple dilemmas. Remember, this is before he has seen the Ghost. If Hamlet fears the Deity, why not pray to Him? But Hamlet cannot—and in all his failures to act, this stands greatest, for this Deity belongs to Ficino and Christ, Moses and Zoroaster. It would be his one best chance to avoid being the loneliest figure ever to grace an English stage.

Hamlet next stands alone on the stage, Act Two, Scene Two, with the soliloquy, "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I."

HAMLET

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it no monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his whole conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,

Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing,
For Hecuba!

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculty of eyes and ears. Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing—no, not for a king
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,
Tweaks me by the' nose, gives me the lie i' th' throat
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
Ha? 'Swounds, I should take it; for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should 'a' fatted all the region kits
With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindles villain!
O, vengeance! —
Why, what an ass am I? Ay, sure, this is most brave,
That I, the son of the dear murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words

And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A scullion! Fie upon't, foh!—About, my brain.
I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks,
I'll tent him to the quick. If a but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil, and the devil hath power
T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy—
As he is very potent with such spirits—
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More elative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

Hamlet

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 552-607

He utters the line, “must unpack my heart with words.” Richard II could have said that, but Hamlet is the far better poet. Faustus and Hamlet might have comparative gifts with language, but this long Hamlet soliloquy shows he also fears Satan. Even after witnessing the Ghost in his beloved father’s form, Hamlet worries this could be Satan.

HAMLET

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil, and the devil hath power
T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy—
As he is very potent with such spirits—
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

Hamlet

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 600-607

Faustus never doubts the supernal structure he exists in and the rules he must play by. Hamlet never stops doubting; he not only doesn't know the rules, but he isn't quite sure what game he's playing. He decides to create his own game with the famous "play within the play." He never considers how if this trick shows Claudius' guilt, the political affairs of Denmark will somehow smoothly, miraculously, evolve into justice and fair play. He might stop worrying about the devil, an excellent contrived excuse not to act, but that will not take him very far down the road towards avenging his father, nor help deal with his multitude of confused feelings about Gertrude, feelings brought to the fore by the Ghost's request to spare her.

Let's hold onto these thoughts and move on to Hamlet's next soliloquy, the famous "To be, or not to be" oration, which takes place only two scenes later, Act Three, Scene Two, lines 58-92. Hamlet again contemplates suicide, the one certain ending to the immensity of his problems. He never considers this sad act will not leave Denmark better off. But unlike his previous contemplation of self-slaughter, he no longer fears his

maker, but only the dreadful uncertainties of the afterlife, from which no man has ever returned. The language is magnificent. The thought is daunting. Hamlet does not like to take action unless he has a trustful prophet's clear forecast before him. His "play within the play" has not yet taken place, so he might still hold lingering thoughts of the devil. But these thoughts would be unclear, as all his thinking. Death is the "undiscovered country," a reference to recently discovered large stretches of land by oceanic explorers. Hamlet is not an explorer, with the single exception of his constant searching within; has he a soul or hasn't he? Is an afterlife—in any shape, kind, or form—possible or very plausible? Will he be lonelier there than the Danish court? Does he have the courage to plunge a dagger into himself and find out? Hamlet is not an ancient Roman. Hence suicide is not honorable. But this leaves him wondering what he could possibly do that would be honorable. He can't comfort his mother because she murdered his father. He can't face the Ghost again because he's failed to revenge his father's murder. What he seems able to do is stand in one spot, endlessly one spot, speaking magnificent language, watching the world spin round.

But his faith has severely declined from the soliloquy which ended with fears of the devil. In "To be, or not to be," Hamlet has fallen completely outside Ficino's three-tiered cosmic structure. His feet are planted on earth, but earth holds no joy or hope or positive meaning for him. Critics err when they quickly pass by Hamlet's cruel, acidic rejection of Ophelia. She is a dear, sweet, lovely, young woman; life on Ficino's lowest tier could offer no better happiness, yet Hamlet is so confused and tormented that he casts her aside, like a shabby blanket that swiftly wore out before its time. The world's most

precious beauty holds no interest for Hamlet. He's too concerned whether he wants to stay here or not.

Ficino's second or middle realm, called celestial, holds a special place for humans. The human spirit can remain inside the body on earth and yet simultaneously rise to the celestial world, inhabited by angels and virtuous daimons. A human in prayerful contemplation can expect to rise in this direction. The highest realm, supercelestial, is available to mystics and saints, in this life and the next. If Hamlet has read Ficino, or the Gospels, he has other options, but his spiritless existence is firmly grounded on earth and suicide. Plausible solutions never occur to Hamlet; he is beloved of the Danish people—hence he could call for a public trial with Claudius as defendant, he could force his mother to confess her sins in public, her one way of saving her soul, or he could stress Biblical commentary opposing a man marrying his brother's wife so soon after the funeral. Hamlet is not without options, but he never enters these possible areas because he ponders too long on the afterlife and supernal trickery. He is headed for the same tragic effect as Richard, though he is the far greater poet. With the possible exception of Lear, he might be the greatest poet to hold the English stage. It might be noted that Lear's virtuous displays of language never lead to a practical solution.

Still in Act Three, Scene Two, Hamlet has one final brief moment alone upon the stage. His "play within the play" trickery has succeeded. Claudius has clearly revealed his monstrous sins. This might be a good time for Hamlet to stab a dagger into his uncle's chest, and then stab and stab again. But still he hesitates. He waits. He has lost Ficino's cosmos and Scripture as guiding paths, and reverted to pagan superstition. He will attack his mother, but not fatally. He decides against

being the “soul of Nero,” but he never yet defines to his own satisfaction the soul of Hamlet.

HAMLET

’Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature! Let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
Let me be cruel, not unnatural.
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites —
How in my words somever she be shent,
To give them seals never my soul consent.

Hamlet

Act Three, Scene Two

lines 377-388

But Hamlet does not confront his mother—not yet. Instead he watches but not overhears a long prayerful soliloquy by Claudius.

KING CLAUDIUS

O, my offence is rank! It smells to heaven.
It hath the primal oldest curse upon’t,
A brother’s murder. Pray I not.
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And like a man to double business bound
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand

Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardoned being down? Then I'll look up.
My fault is past—but O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
That cannot be, since I am still possessed
Of these effects for which I did the murder—
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardoned and retain th' offence?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shore by justice,
And off 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above.
There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
To give in evidence. What then? What rests?
Try what repentance can. What can it net?
Yet what can it when one cannot repent?
O wretched state, O bosom black as death,
O lime'd soul that, struggling to be free,
Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay.
Bow, stubborn knees; and heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe.
All may be well.

Hamlet
Act Three, Scene Three
lines 36-72

Like Faust but unlike Hamlet, Claudius knows what the next life has waiting: the everlasting fires and torments of hell. Faust waits too long to ask forgiveness, and his damnation follows. Claudius does not hear a clock of doom ticking relentlessly in the background; but far worse, he knows his sins can never be forgiven as long as he maintains the evil results of those sins: "My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen." The king finds the dilemma impossible. Public confession would mean a squalid dungeon cell and public burning. Gertrude might fare no better, no matter how hard Hamlet pleaded with her or for her. Oddly, Claudius retains basic Christian beliefs, and these beliefs now damn him. He's trapped on Ficino's bottom world with no hope of ever rising. His plight might arouse sympathy in the audience, if not for his horrifying crime.

Hamlet, unseen, approaches the wretched Claudius at prayer. Obviously this would be a good time to stab that dagger through Claudius, his guilt no longer in doubt. The Ghost spoke true. Yet again Hamlet procrastinates. He lingers. He rationalizes. He fails to act, deciding killing Claudius at prayer would send him straight to heaven and thereby totally fail to revenge his father. Hamlet's anxiety-ridden figuring: Claudius murders my beloved father, and my response is sending Claudius straight to heaven, while the Ghost lingers endlessly in purgatory. Dante might have taken over Ficino and Scripture, but could Hamlet truly believe his formulation?

Claudius committed the sin of Cain, the most heinous murder in Scripture, and will a few tearful prayers overcome that? Claudius realizes there's not enough "rain" in the "sweet heavens" to wash away his sin. Surely this basic notion occurred to Hamlet. If Claudius is Cain, he should be punished.

Hamlet will wait for a better time. But there shall be no better time. Why not execute Claudius, declare the Cainlike deed to the populace, and proclaim the crown for himself? Why not do something? But like Richard II and Faustus, Hamlet would rather ponder the intensely complicated workings of his own frightened overwrought mind. He would rather talk.

Hamlet leaves Claudius, without disturbing a speck of dust, and moves on to Gertrude. A long, disturbing scene takes place between mother and son, with the Ghost making a brief appearance. Hamlet cannot quite accuse his mother of conspiracy to murder, but he makes a detailed, extended comparison of her two husbands, using pagan mythology as metaphors, with her first husband winning on every point. If justice is to happen within the play, it must happen within this scene. Hamlet finally does something; he challenges his mother to surrender her incestuous sheets with her first husband's brother. She won't be talked into this easily; she won't be talked into it at all, but Hamlet, to his credit keeps pressing—if she gives up one sinful night, the second will be surrendered also. She concedes nothing. Her wicked acts might be far harder for her son, still caring for her, to understand than the voluptuous greed of Claudius. Claudius is an apple rotten to the core, with or without prayer, but this woman brought him into the world and raised him. No fall in Eden compares to her.

Yet Scriptural metaphors do not ultimately work in a play when the protagonist is so confused and doubtful of spiritual beliefs. After his extended scene with Gertrude, Hamlet goes to England. More action follows—poisoned rapiers, Ophelia's suicide, Yorick's skull, poisoned chalices—but the chance for justice and reconciliation ended when Hamlet left his mother.

Ultimately this play is about a mother and son, a mother who violates all stages of Ficino's cosmos and shows no concern for her eternal fate, and a son whose life was forever shattered by the tale of a Ghost, a son who spoke brilliantly more often than any character on the English stage, but who could never put the pieces back together, who could never begin to, and who might not have felt all that badly when he felt his life drain away from a poisoned sword. Surely he'd thought and felt with as much color, vibrancy, and compulsion as any figure grounded in time, and with no words dribbling from his lips, he might be ready to take a chance on that supercelestial realm that Ficino had promised to men who act with goodness and nobility.

Chapter Forty-seven:

The Villain of Villains—Richard III

Richard III deserves his own chapter because he dominates his own play more than any Shakespeare character. Only *Hamlet* is a longer play. But while Hamlet dominates many scenes, other characters do exist outside his province. Polonius, for instance, gives a dull lengthy speech to his son Laertius about to travel abroad, and Claudius kneels in prayer in temporary terror of his grievous sins. These scenes could happen without Hamlet; the murders which took place before his entrance into the play obviously occurred without him. These comments are not made to negate Hamlet's immense importance to his own play, nor to world literature, but to draw a contrast. Richard III dominates his play not only when his remarkable verbal skills take stage center, but when other characters, primarily women, lament his murderous deeds. A character cannot take a deep breath without Richard causing him or her a startling array of deep trouble. A census taker would be required for the number of bodies that pile up, from honorable women to Richard's brother to children sleeping innocent as lambs.

Richard is the villain personified. Yet he knows this about himself and never stops knowing it. Perhaps no Shakespeare character ever so fully understands himself as well as Richard. A vocabulary of sin, evil, and Satan cling to him. He does not find this insulting. He only finds it true. His main connection with Ficino exists in that Richard lives in a cosmos fully alive with the endless potential to affect humans in various ways. But Ficino practiced a white magic, with the goal of bringing the soul closer to God. Richard is the contrary of this, the black magus. But Richard's evil might be so dark that his presence had to be conjured by a black magus, or so Lady Anne tells him to his face, "What black magician conjures up this fiend / To stop devoted charitable deeds?" Act One, Scene Two, lines 34-35. A harsher insult might be hard to think up, and yet Richard is not swayed.

Richard has a monstrous, almost unbelievable purpose in standing beside Lady Anne, who showers him with similar insults. She is tearfully watching the coffin of King Henry VI drawn by. Both she and Richard are aware that Richard murdered this king, along with his son, Anne's beloved husband. So why is Richard persistently standing beside her, when he could not be made more hated and unwelcome. His purpose is to court Lady Anne, to overcome the ferocity of her well-spoken feelings so she will consent to wed. Act One, Scene Twp.

Impossible? It would seem so. But Richard might be as confident as evil. He speaks the traditional feelings of a lovesick sonneteer, but he speaks them very quickly, so Lady Anne is always thrust back on her heels to react. When he hands her his sword, bares his breast, and offers to let her stab him, he never ceases to talk—and this is our main point about Richard. He

holds dark magical powers of language. He is tireless in these powers. Lady Anne, exhausted on so many emotional levels, consents to his proposal. He has won her over by the sheer power of language. His relentless power of words prevails. She has altered from all-consuming hatred to feelings far less intense, far less negative, perhaps in brief moments not negative at all. For words to accomplish this astounding transformation, those words must contain a rare power—in this case a power for evil, a power that swiftly separates the soul from God, a power that would not be unknown to a Renaissance black magus.

A minor factor of Richard's wickedness might have interested the Neo-Platonic concerns of Ficino. This side of Ficino believes in orderly hierarchies, including political, and Richard's ruthless killing will make shambles of all this. Until the play closes, no monarch is in his proper place, and even that's not certain. But Ficino would have shuddered in Shakespeare's audience for far deeper reasons.

Meanwhile this black magic requires elements of the supernatural, and Shakespeare supplies that. We need first look in the final play of the bard's Henry VI trilogy, Act Five, Scene Six. This sixth scene shows Richard and King Henry interacting with facts and dialogue, especially prophecies, that shall be essential to reading Richard's own play. Shakespeare must have assumed his audience was familiar with this sixth scene or the legends behind it. Before Richard stabs the king to death, Henry VI gives a eerie gothic prophecy of what Richard's presence will mean to England.

KING HENRY

And thus I prophesy: that many a thousand
Which now mistrust no parcel of my fear,
And many an old man's sign, and many a widow's

And many an orphan's water-standing eye —
Men for their sons', wives for their husbands',
Orphans for their parents' timeless death —
Shall rue the day that ever thou wast born.
The owl shrieked at thy birth—an evil sign;
The night-crow cried, aboding luckless time;
Dogs howled, and hideous tempests shook down trees;
The raven rooked her on the chimney's top;
And chatt'ring pies in dismal discords sung.
Thy mother felt more than a mother's pain,
And yet brought forth less than a mother's hope —
To wit, an indigested and deform'd lump,
Not like the fruit of such a goodly tree.
Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou wast born.
To signify thou cam'st to bite the world

Henry VI, Part 3

Act Five, Scene Six

lines 37-56

Richard is particularly annoyed with this prophecy, especially the section about his malformed birth, about which he shall always be sensitive. Richard was also born with teeth, like the dog he was to become; he was a grasping snapping infant who frightened onlookers. The king's prophecy indicates supernatural portents were about when the villain was born. All those portents show a living cosmos where magic can occur, where wonders are possible, where a Supreme Being carefully looks down. We are in a Christian England mixed with occult forces, as many examples will show.

Hence a strange, sad kind of sympathetic magic indicates a malformed newborn will grow up into a hideous man of evil doing—so says the king. Prophecies are a dominant

factor in Richard's play, and since all come true, an indication is given the supernatural is at work. Perhaps only the supernatural can stop such a mad dark magus as Richard. We have already seen how helpless Lady Anne was against him.

In that sixth scene, Richard requires a long soliloquy of his own, standing over the king's murdered body, before the play can close. Later when that body is in an open coffin in a funeral procession, Lady Anne will notice the wounds bleed afresh at Richard's presence. This should be a decisive hint that Richard is not the best candidate for her next husband, but Richard keeps talking and inevitably his words have their power. His words have their predictive power in Scene Six. But first he recalls his horrid ominous birth, after again stabbing the fallen king, just to be sure.

KING HENRY dies from Richard of Gloucester's stabbing.
Gloucester talks, stabs the corpse, stabs again.

RICHARD

I that have neither pity, love, nor fear,
Indeed, 'tis true that Henry told me of,
For I have often heard my mother say
I came into the world with my legs forward.
Had I not reason, think ye, to make haste,
And seek their ruin that usurped our right?
The midwife wondered and the women cried
'O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!' —
And so I was, which plainly signified
That I should snarl and bite and play the dog.
Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,
Let hell make crooked my mind to answer it.
I had no father, I am like no father;
I have no brother, I am like no brother;

And this word, ‘love,’ which greybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another
And not on me—I am myself alone.
Clarence, beware; thou kept’st me from the light —
But I will sort a pitchy day for thee.
For I will buzz abroad such prophecies
Then Edward shall be fearful of his life,
And then, to purge his fear, I’ll be thy death.
Henry and his son are gone; thou, Clarence, art next;
And by one and one I will dispatch the rest,
Counting myself bad till I be best.
I’ll throw thy body in another room
And triumph, Henry, in thy day of doom.

Exit with the body

Henry VI, Part 3

Act Five, Scene Six

lines 68-94

Shakespeare’s audience most likely would have known this history and the legends surrounding it. But nothing could have prepared them for how totally, with awesome wicked magnificence, Richard would dominate the play that bears his name. The play opens with Richard’s soliloquy of forty lines, taking up where Scene Six left off and yet heralding an ongoing action of unparalleled horror. “I am determined to play a villain / And hate the idle pleasures of these days.” Act One, Scene One, lines 30-31. He will be helped by “drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,” (line 33) weapons used henceforth, to cause unending hatred between his two brothers, King Edward and Duke of Clarence. Richard is particularly hard on kings. The air of England is filled with superstition. Clarence’s baptismal name is George. Richard spreads the false rumor that King Edward will be brutally deposed by a murderer bearing a G of

Edward's heirs. This Edward refers to the king's father. (NOTE: The play suffers from too many Edwards.) The playgoers, or at least modern playgoer without a PhD in English history requires a scorecard; consider Queen Margaret's lines, Act One, Scene Three, lines 196-197, "Edward thy son, that now is prince of Wales, / For Edward my son, that was Prince of Wales." Or later in the play, Queen Margaret sounds even more confusing, "Thy Edward, he is dead, that killed my Edward; / Thy other Edward dead, to quite my Edward;" Act Four, Scene Four, lines 64-64. The critic cannot help but be reminded of Abbot and Costello's classic, "Who's on First?" If Shakespeare's reader finds confusion in the play's family trees, he might be in good company.

What matters is the never-let-go fascination of Richard's plots and counterplots. King Edward, his brother, is not the brightest character in Shakespeare. He jumps at the foolish possibility that Clarence, aka George, means to kill him. This costs Clarence his life, the first of Richard's victims, but not before he's given the finest poetry in the play, his recounting of a horrid, endlessly complex dream during a restless sleep in the tower prison. What the dream accomplishes is to show a cosmos alive, ever mysterious, ever fluctuating. We can assume Ficino would have liked that, though not the climax of pagan afterlife imagery. The pagan and Christian frequently interweave in this play. Clarence tells his dream to Sir Robert Brackenbury, tower guard for notable prisoners, who is badly shaken by listening. It is much too long to quote all, but it begins with line 1 of Act One, Scene Four, and continues to line 79. The realistic and supernal combine, adding to the dream's weird horror. Richard, no surprise, is responsible for the prolonged drowning, another foreshadowing or prophecy. Clarence is still not aware Richard is the cause of his imprisonment and won't be till the ax is

about to crash through his neck. A sadder, more futile death is hard to imagine. When Richard's victims suffer, they truly suffer. This partly accounts for the eerie fascination of the master black magus.

In his dream of drowning, Clarence has sunk countless fathoms below the surface when his poetic voice reaches its greatest heights.

CLARENCE

O Lord! methought what pain it was to drown,
What dreadful noise of waters in my ears,
What sights of ugly death within my eyes.
Methoughts I saw a thousand fearful wrecks,
Ten thousand men that fishes gnawed upon,
Wedges of gold, great ouches, heaps of pearl,
Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
All scattered in the bottom of the sea.
Some lay in dead men's skulls; and in those holes
Where eyes did once inhabit, there were crept —
As 'twere in scorn of eyes—reflecting gems,
Which wooed the slimy bottom of the deep
And mocked the dead bones that lay scattered by.

Richard III

Act One, Scene Four

lines 21-33

We can presume his call “O Lord!” is intended for Christ. But Clarence receives no helpful answer. He is a long time painfully dying. He tries to yield his ghost and cannot. “No, no, my dream was lengthened after life,” line 43.

Clarence's dream next takes him to the pagan underworld. His language is so vibrant and clear that the dream

takes on a supernal reality all its own. He is punished for a killing he made on the battlefield of Tewkesbury. This apparition foreshadows the ghostly visits both Richard and Richmond will receive on the night before the fatal battle of Bosworth in the play's final act. Shakespeare can never get far away from the supernatural, or powers seemingly far above the ordinary. The apparition seeking revenge on Clarence, "A shadow like an angel, with bright hair, / Dabbled in blood," lines 54-55. This strange angel screams revenge. Let Clarence speak the rest, to us and Brackenbury

CLARENCE

With that, methought a legion of foul fiends
Environed me, and howled in mine ears
Such hideous cries that with the very noise
I trembling waked, and for a season after
Could not believe but that I was in hell,
Such terrible impression made my dream.

Richard III

Act One, Scene Four

lines 58-63

We should focus on Clarence's impression that he was in hell. Hell and devil are common images in the play, though usually referred to Richard. Not too many characters in this play have a clear conscience, though Richard might be the only character with no conscience at all.

Women will frequently curse and make dire prophecies about Richard—Henry VI set the precedent in his own play—and those unwelcome messages are usually tinged with hellfire. The women are not devout Christians when it comes to prayers and sanctimonious lives; they seem only to rely on their Christian faith for aid in cursing. It seems unlikely any of them

spent long hours pouring over Scripture. What they do when they aren't tearing their hair out in rage and lamentation is not exactly known. Clarence's long dream prepares us for them. He ends his major scene with the quiet line, "My soul is heavy, and I would fain sleep," line 70.

Queen Elizabeth shows a belief in the supernatural when she enters the stage to announce her husband, King Edward, long ailing, has passed. Her belief is momentary, for her grief can find no solace but a pagan, "ne'er-changing night," not unlike the latter part of Clarence's dream. The queen laments:

QUEEN ELIZABETH

If you will live, lament; if die, be brief,
That our swift-winged souls may catch the King's,
Or like obedient subjects follow him
To his new kingdom of ne'er-changing night.

Richard III

Act Two, Scene Two
lines 43-46

Several lines later, Queen Elizabeth will add astrology to her grieving. She is now in competition with the Duchess of York to determine who has suffered most. Women outside melodrama do not behave this way. The Duchess has lost two sons, Clarence and Edward—here that scorecard becomes necessary—and she still has her third son, the scoundrel Richard, to deal with, as of course does all England. Yet Queen Elizabeth won't be topped.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Give me no help in lamentation.
I am not barren to bring forth complaints.
All springs reduce their currents to mine eyes,

That I, being governed by the wat'ry moon,
May send forth plenteous fears to drown the world.
Ah, for my husband, for my dear Lord Edward!

Richard III

Act Two, Scene Two
lines 66-71

At least in this scene the Queen won't be topped, but the champion of the three female lamenters in this play has to be elderly Queen Margaret, if only because she gets so many more lines than Elizabeth and the Duchess of York, also elderly at eighty. This number eighty makes the audience wonder just how old she was when she gave birth to her sons; Shakespeare provides no answer, but she must have been a mother a very long time. In Act One, Scene Three, when Queen Margaret first appears before Richard, his outrage is prompt, "Foul wrinkled witch, what mak'st thou in my sight," line 164. She will show the prophetic and cursing powers of a witch throughout the play. She will even teach the practice of cursing. The foreordained doom of Richard's plot falls under her spell—she is the one character who, though miserably aged, just might compete with him.

Richard and Margaret have hurled curses before the play started. The audience is counted on knowing much about what happened before the play started. The infant Rutland—who?—was murdered in the past, somehow by Margaret's doing, and Richard now lashes out at her.

RICHARD

The curse my noble father laid on thee —
When thou didst crown his warlike brows with paper,
And with thy scorns drew'st rivers from his eyes,
And then, to dry them, gav'st the duke a clout

Steeped in the faultless blood of pretty Rutland —
He curses then, from bitterness of soul
Denounced against thee, are all fall'n upon thee,
And God, not we, hath plagues thy bloody deed.

Richard III

Act One, Scene Three

lines 171-178

Queen Margaret is put on the defensive but only momentarily. Margaret strikes back several times—she's a virtuoso of melodramatic assaulting language—and the original bravado and sheer length of her curses wears all down. We of course cannot quote all, but we will show where she again links Richard's misshapen birth, today a hunchback with a withered arm, with hell and his mother's horror.

QUEEN MARGARET

Thou elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog,
Thou was sealed in thy nativity
The slave of nature and the son of hell,
Thou slander of thy heavy mother's womb,
Thou loathe'd issue of the father's loins,
Thou rag of honour, thou detested —

Richard III

Act One, Scene Three

lines 225-230

When this long scene is at last over, two minor characters, both men, comment on Margaret's performance. Hastings says, "My hair doth stand on end to hear her curses," line 302. Rivers follows with, "And so doth mine. I muse why she's at liberty."

Richard is not unaware of the witchcraft in his female opponents. He might live in a Christian country—hence the

bishops and priest—but his fears are encompassed by the occult. Two essential Richard speeches reveal this in Act Three, Scene Four.

RICHARD

I pray you all, tell me what they deserve
That do conspire my death with devilish plots
Of Damned witchcraft, and that have prevailed
Upon my body with their hellish charms?

Richard III

Act Three, Scene Four
lines 59-62

RICHARD

Then be your eyes the witness of their evil:
See how I am bewitched. Behold, mine arm
Is like blasted sapling withered up.
And this is Edward's wife, that monstrous witch,
Consorted with that harlot, strumpet Shore,
That by their witchcraft thus have marke'd me.

Richard II

Act Three, Scene Four
lines 67-72

A few lines later, Hastings, soon to be beheaded by Richard's order, will proclaim, "O Margaret, Margaret! Now thy heavy curse / Is lighted on pour Hastings' wretched head," lines 93-94.

What these quotations show is how deeply the characters trust the most lurid and ghastly sides of the supernatural. The occult leanings appear—they do frequently—and they are dark, gloomy, hellish. It's hard to imagine an adult character in this play reaching a Christian heaven, and perhaps harder to find clear signs this concerns them. Three noblemen

about to be executed by ax talk of meeting again in heaven, but otherwise they and other victims prefer life for life's sake. Richard's England has almost become a microcosm for hell on earth, with cosmic omens occasionally mentioned, as in Clarence's dream or Henry VI's prophesy, and with keeping alive in this hell the only possible worthy option. Queen Margaret, her prophecies wickedly fulfilled, talks of escaping to France, but it cannot be imagined she has long to live there.

The one overwhelming horror audiences remember from Richard's grab bag of evil is the cold-blooded murder of the two young boy princes while they slept side by side, innocent as lambs, in the tower. Only Richard's fierce power of command could have gotten them into the tower, an often overlooked fact, for where else would the young boys be so vulnerable. Richard hires a professional killer, James Tyrrell, who in turn hires two more professional killers to do the unthinkable deed. All three killers have regrets. After this, Richard can no longer shock and stun. Margaret will teach Elizabeth how to curse in a brief stunning passage.

QUEEN MARGARET

Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days;
Compare dread happiness with living woe;
Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were,
And he that slew them fouler than he is.
Bett'ring thy loss makes the bad causer worse.
Revolving this will teach thee how to curse.

Richard III

Act Four, Scene Four

lines 118-123

Yet Elizabeth will be helpless when Richard uses her to court her young daughter, also Elizabeth—again the scorecard—with

Richard overcoming a woman's intense hatred, as he had early in the play with Lady Anne, with verbal virtuosity applied to romantic courtship. Not much has changed. Only far more bodies have cluttered the stage.

Shakespeare returns to his gifts as an historical playwright to conclude Richard's play, the bard's second longest effort. Only *Hamlet* is longer. As a courtly romance requires, Richmond kills Richard in single combat, with the battle of Bosworth field raging all around them—but only this single contest matters. King Richard III is dead, and the black magic that encompassed poor tired England is over. Richmond becomes King Henry VII, and he marries the young Elizabeth, uniting the houses of York and Lancaster. Peace now has a chance. Queen Elizabeth has lived eighty years to see this chance happening, with her beloved daughter the lynchpin, with her precious girl the hope.

Chapter Forty-eight:

The World's Greatest Love Story—Romeo and Juliet

Romeo and Juliet is opened by a rhyming chorus that mentions “star-crossed lovers.” This has become one of the many famous quotes of the play, and it would seem the two young lovers do have the astrological fates set against them. Shakespeare develops this astrological theme with further star-crossed language. He also weaves throughout the play the cosmic Neo-Platonic language of microcosm-macrocosm, with intensely emotional earthly events directly related to the planetary system above. Ficino would have deeply admired this, and probably felt his influence resided in this pervasive metaphoric structure. The result is the most beloved, and perhaps most brilliant, romantic love poetry in western literature. The cosmos must always be alive as the deep loving affection between the two young protagonists bursts into life with their poetry.

Young is a key term. We cannot be sure of Romeo’s exact age, but Juliet has yet to turn fourteen. Neither are pillars of emotional stability. It is unlikely Romeo is very much older. Youth can also describe the freshness and originality of their

love poetry. They are at one with all the natural forces around them. They are each a poetic magus who can create such sustained lovely words.

When the play opens, Romeo, always the lover, pines away for the unrequited love of Rosaline. We know her only through the speeches of Romeo; she never makes an appearance. Romeo utters a litany of Petrarchan conceits about Rosaline's beauties. His references could apply to spiritual alchemy, a masterstroke by Shakespeare for Romeo's spirits are unbearably low. Like many sonneteers, he has become a connoisseur of suffering

ROMEO

This love that thou hast shown
Doth add more grief to too much of mine own.
Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs,
Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes,
Being vexed, a sea nourished with lovers' tears.

Romeo and Juliet

Act One, Scene One

lines 185-189

Benvolio, a kinsman, a cousin, is the single audience of this outburst. But Romeo will have much more to say, and he dominates the final eighty-five lines of Act One, Scene One. After complaining of Rosaline's determined chastity, with the sonneteer's language of Cupid and Dian, Romeo makes a specific reference to the first fourteen sonnets of Shakespeare, and the message of these sonnets can be directed to the final section of Plato's *Symposium*, first translated into Latin with commentary by Ficino. In Plato, a lovely young man, Alcibiades, is criticized for his refusal to reproduce and thereby allow his extraordinary beauty to die out with him. This passage

often gets overlooked in *The Symposium*, because Alcibiades is still a very young man with many years left to reproduce, and his primary sexual orientation is homosexual with an attachment to the elderly Socrates, thereby following the tradition in classical Greece of lovely young men—perhaps boys—forming liaisons with much older men. Shakespeare used this same theme in his first fourteen sonnets, which use all the wise and subtle methods of verse to persuade emphatically a handsome young man to reproduce so his rare beauty shall be preserved in times forward.

Shakespeare had to feel strongly about this or he would not have composed this small self-enclosed cycle of sonnets. Scholars who have attempted finding the historical identity of Shakespeare's young man are whistling in the wind. No serious evidence exists. But it only requires lining up two texts beside each other to ascertain the strong, clear influence of Plato on Shakespeare. If modern readers feel uncomfortable—to the point of denial—with this homoerotic analysis, the Elizabethan would have suffered no such problem. Why? Because all women's parts in all Elizabethan plays were performed by lovely, effeminate young men. These young men would often be courted on stage by older male actors. The morals of the times required this, a morals far removed from our own time, and not a close reading of *The Symposium*, though a knowledge of the latter would surely have added to the fullness of experience enjoyed by the playgoer. Shakespeare's sonnets were then unpublished—that would not occur till 1608—but handwritten copies were freely circulated about, and an audience member to have read the opening fourteen would have his playgoing afternoon subtly deepened.

Let us keep all these strains in mind as we return to Romeo's laments of the chaste Rosaline, with Benvolio still the only listener on stage. Romeo shows some signs of a classical education, always possible for an aristocratic young man in Renaissance Verona, when he applies the Alcibiades argument to Rosaline. He urges her to reproduce to preserve her magnificent beauty for blessed future generations. Romeo, still not having met Juliet, would like to be the lucky man Rosaline couples with to get her reproduction started. His problem, rather huge, is Rosaline does not hear his eloquent plea, only Benvolio. Romeo begins his argument with a couplet.

ROMEO

O, she is rich in beauty, only poor
That when she dies, with beauty dies her store.

Romeo and Juliet
Act One, Scene One
lines 212-213

Benvolio, getting the gist of the problem, promptly responds, "Then she hath sworn that she will still live chaste?" Romeo concludes his Platonic argument with three lines. He is not often an unselfish lover. This might be the time.

ROMEO

She hath, and in that sparing makes huge waste;
For beauty carved with her seventy
Cuts beauty off from all posterity.

Romeo and Juliet
Act One, Scene One
lines 215-217

If Rosaline happened to overhear, she would be played by a lovely young boy, an Elizabethan Alcibiades, who obviously

could not reproduce. A deft, subtle humor might exist in these lines that are lost on the modern audiences. What is not lost is Romeo places himself in a long line of well-known lovers, and this shall add to the greatness of his poetic inspiration when he finally meets Juliet.

But first Shakespeare has a forty-line virtuoso speech on an extended magical dream awaiting us. The speaker is the mercurial Mercutio, who brilliantly reveals his dream of Queen Mab, the fairies' midwife. Mercutio is creating a specific mythology, not to be forgotten. Not till Prospero will a Shakespeare character display such a lengthy display of magical verse. Mercutio's dream speech occurs in Act One, Scene Four, lines 55-94. Like Prospero, he can pile on one wondrous image after another. Queen Mab lives in a Lilliputian world of explicit tininess, and the wide-ranging Hermetic imagination of Mercutio moves from one strikingly original image of smallness, all contained in a mystic nature, to another. All images are excellent, and space prevents quoting the entire speech. But the reader who doubts Shakespeare's abiding concern with magical verse should re-explore Mercutio's dream several times.

After his dream speech, Mercutio enters a rare modesty in disclaiming any special talents for his performance. We recall Prospero comparing life to "the stuff that dreams are made of." Mercutio continues to show his poetic virtuosity, but this time with a vastly different style and mood. He denies the marvels of his dream, and yet interposes cosmic energy from north and south. He can never be far from thinking deep thoughts with deep intentions.

MERCUTIO

True. I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,
Which is as thin of substance as the air,
And more inconstant than the wind, who woos
Even now the frozen bosom of the north,
And, being angered, puffs away from thence,
Turning his face to the dew-dropping south.

Romeo and Juliet

Act One, Scene Four

lines 97-103

Mercutio has suddenly changed the mood. This is not, after all, a play about magical Lilliputians. But the play will lose its greatest and most forceful wit when Mercutio falls by Tybalt's sword. Mercutio has no sooner ceased talking—no doubt to catch his breath—when Romeo bursts forth with an eight-line speech of dark ominous portents. He does refer to the astrological stars of the opening chorus, a thematic occurrence. He will be attending a masque ball at the house of Capulet, his family enemy of longstanding bitter hatred, without which we would not have a play. That masque will lead young Romeo to experience the heights and lows of human experience, always in conjunction with the overhead sky, the play's metaphoric theme. But this speech foresees only the darkness, and Shakespeare's remarkable gift for sudden, jolting changes of mood and intent, for Romeo speaks only twelve lines. The all-is-light Queen Mab recital is finally over.

ROMEO

I fear too early, for my mind misgives
Some consequence yet hanging in the stars

Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
With this night's revels, and expire the term
Of a despised life, closed in my breast,
By some vile forfeit of untimely death.
Be he that hath the steerage of my course
Direct my sail! On, lusty gentlemen.

Romeo and Juliet
Act One, Scene Four
lines 106-113

Romeo's mood changes entirely after he first sees Juliet at the masque. The Petrarchan conceits of Rosaline no longer apply. Rosaline is forgotten as fast as a finger-snap, or that first look at Juliet. Her name shall never again be applicable. Romeo's endless whining over her—it is as though it never happened. Throughout Shakespeare's many plays, heterosexual characters often fall in love at first sight. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the essential line occurs—whatever loves if not a first sight. As we know, however, the line originates with Marlowe. Friar Laurence worries that Romeo's all-new overpowering passion—today Juliet, yesterday Rosaline—is based on eyes and little else. The good friar has ample reason to fret and worry, because Romeo might spy yet a better-looking young woman tomorrow.

Reviewing Shakespeare's plays, no character falls in love with the lightning speed of Romeo. He knows nothing about Juliet, her mind, her wit, her talent, her education—only what she looks like. It stretches comprehension that any woman, especially one played by a young boy, could look that good. But Romeo, a great poet if not a great interior thinker, believes so. Belief is the correct term for before this masque is over Juliet will become a religion to him, and he still will not know more

than she speaks well and what she looks like. The play would be helped if Shakespeare found a hauntingly beautiful, effeminate young boy to play Juliet, and such boys must have existed for the system of boy actors to have succeeded, lasting from early Elizabethan theatre to the Puritan revolution.

Aside from these factors, what makes Romeo's split-second falling in love so utterly convincing is his language. With one look, Juliet has become the light of his life, and both lovers will use images of cosmic light and darkness, including magical stars and rare sunlike powers, to explicate their love, which lasts only a few days before their ultimate tragedy. It is part of Shakespeare's deep sense of irony that the devoted young couple lives only a dew-drop of time compared to the astrological bodies overhead.

Romeo introduces this thematic structure after first seeing Juliet, doubtlessly the greatest event of his life up to that time.

ROMEO

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
As a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear —
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows
As yonder lady o'er her felons shows.
The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,
And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.
Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight,
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

Romeo and Juliet

Act One, Scene Five

lines 43-52

His desire to touch her hand takes place shortly and becomes a religious event. The modern reader cannot help but be reminded of Tony and Maria first meeting in *West Side Story*.

ROMEO (to Juliet, touching her hand)

If I profane with my unworthiest hand
 This holy shrine, the gentler sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
 To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

Romeo and Juliet
Act One, Scene Five
lines 92-95

Juliet modestly continues the religious imagery, referring to her still nameless admirer as “Good pilgrim,” line 96. Juliet then becomes “dear saint.” This calm intensity of religious expression leads to their first kiss, then their second. Juliet might think this young man has his courtship lines too well rehearsed, “You kiss by th’ book,” line 109. Juliet is called away by her mother. Romeo learns the news of overpowering danger—his new love is a Capulet. His response is sadly predictable: “O dear account! My life is in my foe’s debt,” line 117.

Romeo disappears momentarily, but not for long. He cannot let this sacred night pass without a lover’s tryst with Juliet. He re-enters to begin Act II with an unrhymed couplet. Cosmic forces fasten him irrevocably to wherever Juliet is, irregardless of personal risk. This time Romeo’s cosmic imagery looks as far downward as it usually looks upward. He has found an image for the depth of his affection.

ROMEO

Can I go forward when my heart is here?
Turn back, dull earth, and find thy centre out.

Romeo and Juliet

Act Two, Scene One
lines 1-2

Mercutio and Benvolio try to find their lovesick companion, but he cannot be found. It surpasses their comprehension that Romeo would be rash and foolhardy enough to sneak back into the Capulet's property. Mercutio is still magical, though in a different vein. Still thinking his friend's heart was lodged with Rosaline, as it was but a short hour ago, he tongue-in-cheek plays Petrarchan magus.

MERCUTIO

I conjure thee by Rosaline's bright eyes,
By her high forehead and her scarlet lip,
By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh,
And the demesnes that here adjacent lie,
That in thy likeness thou appear to us.

Romeo and Juliet

Act Two, Scene One
lines 17-21

Benvolio points out that Romeo would not appreciate this comic utterance: "An if he hear thee, thou will anger him," line 22. Mercutio doubts the comic touch would upset his lovelorn friend, and then playfully enters the realm of genuine magic, familiar to Prospero and Shakespeare's audience. Mercutio consents these lines would anger the absent Romeo, but he delights in giving them anyway. His consistent

exuberance over language, sometimes for the sheer sake of language, will not be halted.

MERCUTIO

This cannot anger him. 'Twould anger him
To raise a spirit in his mistress' circle
Of some strange nature, letting it there stand
Till she had laid it and conjured it down.
That were some spite. My invocation
Is fair and honest. In his mistress' name,
I conjure only but to raise up him.

Romeo and Juliet
Act One, Scene Two
lines 23-29

Mercutio next offers crude sexual language in referring to Romeo's fondness for the fair sex, "O Romeo, that she were, O that she were / An open arse /and thou a popp'rin pear," lines 38-39. We can be certain Romeo would not be pleased at this coarse yet somehow witty utterance.

Elizabethans must have been fond and knowing of such sexual word play or Shakespeare would not have given it to them so often. Mercutio's last three quotes, all aimed at different kinds of wit by a virtuoso talker, are strikingly different from Romeo's connecting romantic attraction with religion. Yet Shakespeare holds all together within the same play, between two characters who know each other well and genuinely like each other. Why Shakespeare succeeds is all modes of language are by masterly speakers, all tinged or influenced deeply by over a century of Renaissance magic.

When Benvolio and Mercutio leave the stage, Romeo promptly comes forward. He and Juliet are about to embark on

the most heralded love scene in western literature. But first Romeo has a snappish response to Mercutio, whom he has apparently overheard, "He jests at scars who never felt a wound." This line takes on a painful irony to theatre-goers who can keep it in memory, for after the love scene Mercutio shall suffer a sword wound in a horrid street brawl that is all too mortal, and he shall die as he has lived, with unforgettable eloquence.

But now is Romeo's turn to talk well and no anxious lover has ever done it better. If we quote extensively, our reason is no section in Shakespeare shows more convincingly his strong cosmic Neo-Platonic tendencies. We can never prove he read Ficino, nor is this particularly necessary. But his opening fourteen sonnets show a close reading of Plato, and such dedication to Plato could easily move into Neo-Platonic traits, made possible by Ficino and widely read throughout the Renaissance. Yet this allusive statement remains slippery, without infallible proof. We turn then to the *Hermetica* which frequently insists on the likeness of below and above, the cherished common Renaissance belief, always associated with magic, of the microcosm-macrocosm connection. Romeo and Juliet frequently play on this connection as they speak their language of love to each other.

Romeo begins this technique, placing himself at night below Juliet's window for the famous balcony scene, with some of Shakespeare's best-loved poetry.

ROMEO (coming forward)

He jests at scars that never felt a wound.
But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

Who is already sick and pale with grief
That thou, her maid, art far more than she.

Romeo and Juliet
Act Two, Scene One
lines 44-48

He sees Juliet enter aloft. His romantic verse reaches the cosmic heights of metaphysical splendor. Juliet might only have known him one brief scene, shared two brief kisses, though few women would not be held captive by such an outpouring, especially an impressionable young woman not yet fourteen who has not been courted before. Her first time will have all the trappings of experienced love-talk. Previously Romeo had compared his sudden new love to religion. Now she takes in the cosmos and all its wonders. If Copernicus or Galileo fell in love, they could not express themselves better than this. Her every move holds magic, like her hand upon her cheek. Her very presence holds all the magic the cosmos is capable of bestowing. Romeo begins again by recognizing her sudden presence.

ROMEO (enter Juliet aloft)

It is my lady, O, it is my love.
O that she knew she were!
She speaks, yet she says nothing. What of that?
Her eye discourses; I will answer it.
I am too bold. 'Tis not to me she speaks.
Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,
Having some business, do entreat her eyes
To twinkle in their spheres till they return.
What if her eyes were there, they in her head? —
The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars
As daylight doth a lamp; her eye in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright

That birds would sing and think it were not night.
See how she leans her cheek upon her hand.
O, that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch that cheek.

Romeo and Juliet

Act Two, Scene One
lines 52-67

Juliet, also with the gift of falling in love at first sight, can only reply, "Ay me," line 68. Romeo is of course thrilled just to hear her voice, "She speaks," line 69. More romantic moments will soon be coming. Romeo could start climbing the wall to her, but he cannot resist another controlled explosion of cosmic verse.

ROMEO

She speaks.

O, speak again, bright angel; for thou art
As glorious to this night, being o'er my head,
As is a winged messenger of heaven
Unto the white upturned wond'ring eyes
Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him
When he bestrides the lazy-passing clouds
And sails upon the bosom of the air.

Romeo and Juliet

Act Two, Scene One
lines 68-74

Juliet takes her turn in speaking, without yet realizing Romeo hears her. The cosmic imagery is given a rest for a while. Juliet will regret she loves a Montague and discounts the meaning of a name in oft quoted lines, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet," lines 85-86. Romeo will refer to his new love as "new

baptized," line 92, and "dear saint," line 97. Juliet shall never lose her religious aura. Ninety lines later, Juliet takes her turn to talk in cosmic terms.

JULIET

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep. The more I give to thee
The more I have, for both are infinite.

Romeo and Juliet

Act Two, Scene One

lines 175-177

If Juliet had more rich poetry to convey, she does not get the chance, for her Nurse intrudes. Before Romeo makes his necessary departure into the night, the ever talkative lovers agree to wed tomorrow with Friar Laurence performing the secret ceremony. The lovers do not have time to consider further plans, which would have been practical. They agree to wed having known each other about three hours, maybe less. Their poetry seems to make up for a long stable courtship.

It is possible this might be how weddings are brought about in Verona. When Juliet's father determines his daughter wed County Paris, a pleasant male specimen, Juliet is expected to reply with a resounding obedient yes on the instant. She does not even get the approximate three hours she had to make up her mind about Romeo. She surely does not get the moment to tell her bullying patriarchal father, who refuses to hear a word she says, that she has already married Romeo, earlier that day, after meeting him only the night before, the only son of the hated Montagues, the wicked young man who slayed Tybalt Capulet almost immediately after marrying his cousin Juliet. We can assume Papa Capulet would not like to hear all that.

Romeo has been banished to Mantua, and it would never occur to Papa this might concern his daughter.

After this explosive day, the plot becomes endlessly complicated. Our task is not to unravel the many skeins of yarn that will twist together. We are dealing with magic and we shall continue our study of cosmic imagery, though from now on the action of the play rapidly sweeps by us. The lovers' tragic ending is all too familiar to Shakespeare devotees, but the imagery shall help to tell us how they got there. Their feet were not entirely planted on this world and that made them, at the first sign of trouble, seek entry into the next one.

The characters do believe in an afterlife, entered immediately upon dying, though scant Christian vocabulary accompanies this. After Tybalt slays Mercutio, Romeo plans to seek revenge by slaying Tybalt, which happens. Romeo's four angry lines depict an afterlife.

ROMEO

Now, Tybalt, take the ^cvillain back again
That late thou gav'st me, for Mercutio's soul
Is but a little way above our heads,
Staying for thine to keep him company.
Either thou, or I, or both must go with him.

Romeo and Juliet

Act Three, Scene One

lines 125-129

When Juliet laments her seemingly impossible situation to her Nurse, she invokes an afterlife.

JULIET

O, God—O Nurse, how shall this be prevented?
My husband is on earth, my faith in heaven.

How shall that faith return again to earth
Unless that husband send it me from heaven
By leaving earth? Comfort me, counsel me.
Alack, alack, that heaven should practice stratagems
Upon so soft a subject as myself!
What sayst thou? Hast thou not a word of joy?
Some comfort, Nurse.

Romeo and Juliet
Act Three, Scene Five
lines 204-212

When Juliet is thought dead from Friar Laurence's magical potion, the Friar comforts the Capulets by emphasizing Juliet is now in heaven. We can assume this vague heaven is Christian because the Friar, for all his superstitions, has taken holy orders, but no specific words indicate this. When Romeo in Mantua mistakenly learns his beloved has died, he expresses a brief concept of the afterlife in a single sentence, "Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight," Act Five, Scene One, line 34. The afterlife is not a vital part of the play, though with so many young people dying so young, it merits mention.

A magical cosmos allows for the practice of alchemy and the making of magic potions. Friar Laurence holds these arcane powers, and expresses his gifts in a thirty line speech at the beginning of Act Two, Scene Two. He starts out alone as a soliloquy and continues when Romeo joins him. We quote four essential lines.

FRIAR LAURENCE

O mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities,
For naught so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give;

Romeo and Juliet
Act Two, Scene Two
lines 15-18

Two potions, one taken by each lover, will prove lunch-pins to the play's tragic outcome. Friar Laurence might have done as much harm as help. At the play's close, only he can go back over the plot for those demoralized, still living.

Juliet has only been a bride a brief time, perhaps no more than an hour—it is difficult to focus on specific times in this hectic day—when she opens Act Three, Scene Two with her long thirty-one line soliloquy beckoning forth the night when her groom comes to her. She has no idea this groom has slain her cousin Tybalt, perhaps while she speaks, when she begins her array of wondrous day-night imagery in her impatient longing for night, “Thou sober-suited matron of all in black,” line 11, the time when Romeo shall enter her arms. Nine lines later she starts to fret about her own early death—Juliet and a blade make dangerous companions—and burst into concise, metaphysical imagery that unites Romeo with the stars, which are still many hours from coming out.

JULIET

Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-browed night,
Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die
Take him and cut him out in little stars
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Romeo and Juliet
Act Three, Scene Two
lines 20-25

The second half of the play finds Juliet the better poet of the two lovers, after Romeo and Mercutio have dominated the first half. When Juliet learns the slayer of Tybalt, she swiftly seizes the endless brutal ramifications and her twelve line speech, heard only by the non-comprehending Nurse, takes all nature and religion apart and puts them back together, only to shred them apart again. Juliet becomes a virtuoso of the oxymoron. Though only thirteen, not even Rosalind (*As You Like It*) or Cleopatra were better poets.

JULIET

O serpent heart hid with a flow'ring face!
Bid ever dragon keep so fair a care?
Beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical!
Dove-feathered raven, wolvish-ravening lamb!
Despised substance of divinest show!
Just opposite to what thou justly seem'st —
A damned saint, an honourable villain.
O Nature, what hadst thou to do in hell
When thou didst bower the spirit of a fiend
In mortal paradise of such sweet flesh?
Was ever book containing such vile matter
So fairly bound? O, that deceit should dwell
In such a gorgeous palace!

Romeo and Juliet

Act Three, Scene Two

lines 73-85

Act Three, Scene Five begins with the two lovers' final moments together. Romeo has used a rope-ladder to climb into Juliet's loft. To get beneath the loft, he again had to scale a difficult wall, and so he is one lover who can do considerably more than talk. If Shakespeare's audience suspected Romeo of

supernal athletic skills to reach his lover, the playwright might have smiled whimsically, with no strong disagreement. This fifth scene opens with the sun rising and so the lovers, always at severe risk, must part. They feel reluctance, not unlike the narrator of John Donne's "The Sun Rising." The lovers are again inviolably connected to nature. They definitely hear a bird sing, but cannot clearly make out its song. If a nightingale sings, it is still night and Romeo can stay a little longer. If the lark twills, daylight has come and he must flee. Still the lovers talk, matching cosmic day-night imagery, as they so often have before. It seems appropriate they do so, for sadly they shall never speak together again. Juliet contemplates the eccentric in nature, "Some day the lark and loathed toad changed eyes," line 31. Obviously she has no good feelings about the impending lark. Romeo refers to "The vaulty heaven so high above our heads," line 22. Fourteen lines later he sums up, "More light and light, more dark and dark our woes," line 36. The Nurse now enters and any further efforts at love's ecstatic verse are gone.

Juliet takes Friar Laurence's magic potion at the close of Scene Three in Act Four. Her vial's power to take and return a body to life might remind the reader of the famous god-making passage in *Hermetica*. The Friar certainly has similar powers, though we might be stretching. What cannot be exaggerated is the greatness of Juliet's fifty-seven line soliloquy before swallowing the potion. She relates a miniature Gothic novel, though no Gothic potboiler ever wrote this well. Juliet moves swiftly between this life and the next, her fears and hopes, her slain cousin and his slayer, her new husband. She is a young heartfelt mind at war with itself. She vividly imagines being

buried in the vast Capulet tomb, where she will be surrounded by endless horrors, even supernal, “where, as they say, / At some hours in the night spirits resort,” lines 43-44. Like with the long Queen Mab speech by Mercutio, practical matters prevent us from quoting all of Juliet’s intense Hermetic reverie, but readers should be encouraged to go back and pour over it again and again. Like Queen Mab, though entirely different in tone, this passage shows convincingly Shakespeare’s dedicated involvement with occult-magical imagery, in Juliet’s instance applied to life and death issues, while the ever witty Mercutio had enjoyed a mind-delighting eye-catching romp. Shakespeare, the peerless master of so many styles, is often ready to employ those styles to serve the various gradations of Renaissance magic.

Romeo adds to that magic at the start of Act Five. Like Mercutio, he has a dream, but Romeo’s dream is filled with frightening portents of his future—he is, after all, a young man banished for murder, wed to the ferocious enemy of his family—but his dream account is a soliloquy of only eleven lines.

ROMEO

If I may trust the flattering truth of sleep,
My dreams presage some joyful news at hand.
My bosom’s lord sits lightly in his throne,
And all this day an unaccustomed spirit
Lifts me above the ground with cheerful thoughts.
I dreamt my lady came and found me dead —
Strange dream, that gives a dead man leave to think! —
And breathed such life with kisses in my lips
That I revived and was an emperor.
Ah me, how sweet is love itself possessed

When but love's shadows are so rich in joy!

Romeo and Juliet

Act Five, Scene One

lines 1-11

Fourteen lines later, Romeo will remark, “Then I defy you stars.” Romeo does not feel himself a “star-crossed lover,” for he proceeds to take direct action so he will lie with Juliet tonight, both in her grave and heaven, whatever he might mean by heaven. He is young, foolish, yet acts quickly with clarity of thought, immature. He is not all that different from his beloved, who tried a desperate remedy to avoid the most desperate of situations. Romeo, feeling himself in a similar situation, finally reaches Juliet’s grave, slaying the unfortunate County Paris in the process. He prepares for suicide, casting aside the cruel fates of society. This does make sense, for the cruelty derives from the two endlessly feuding families.

ROMEO

O, here

Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh.

Romeo and Juliet

Act Five, Scene Three

lines 109-112

It now only remains for the two lovers to die. Their best poetry has been spoken. Their families’ reconciliation will do them little good. The sun they often talked on will never shine on them again, and Juliet will never live to see fourteen.

Chapter Forty-nine:

Magical Structures in Three Comedies

Three Comedies

This brief chapter continues the magical resurrection theses of the plays of the previous chapter. Again we emphasize Shakespeare might not have had on his writing table the brief *Asclepius* passage on god-making, or the Gospel chapter on Christ raising Lazarus, when he composed the three comedies to be discussed. Yet each play results in primary characters suddenly, inexplicably, yes miraculously returning to life. The plays do not contain Christian imagery or content, but themes of alchemy and astrology pervade. The gods mentioned are pagan gods. The Renaissance magus was praised, or condemned for claiming to hold power over life and death. No Prospero appears in these three comedies—*All's Well That Ends Well*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing*—but an Elizabethan audience would have felt magical spells, or shared these spells with the characters, when these characters make abrupt returns from the beyond. This leads to our thesis that Shakespeare himself can be the magus, while creating characters with strongly similar beliefs.

The character of Helen causes those concepts to be better developed in *All's Well* than other two plays. Helen is our one character to hold serious magical powers, which she displays in healing the King. His majesty suffers from a slow, painful, life-taking fistula, an abnormal duct or passage, leading from an abscess, cavity, or hollow organ either to the body's surface or to another hollow organ. This definition might provide more information than was available in Elizabethan times. Meanwhile all physicians, wise and experienced, have failed to cure or remedy their suffering king.

Earlier in the play, Helen has expressed her strong romantic love for Bertram. Helen, an orphan, was raised by Bertram's kindly mother, the Countess of Rousillon, and she and Bertram have known each other from childhood, when they were innocent playmates. Helen's passion has been a long time building. But she realizes she lives under a rigid class system, another resounding echo of Ficino's Neo-Platonic harmony, and so Bertram can never be hers. Helen expresses her hopelessness with imagery from astrology and medicine, often an alchemical subject.

HELEN

I have forgot him. My imagination
Carries no favour in't but Bertram's.
I am undone. There is no living, none,
If Bertram be away. 'Twere all one
That I should love a bright particular star
And think to wed it, he is so above me.
In his bright radiance and collateral light
Must I be comforted, not in his sphere.
Th' ambition in my love thus plagues itself.
The hind that would be mated by the lion

Must die for love. 'Twas pretty, though a plague,
To see him every hour, to sit and draw
His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls,
In our heart's table—heart too capable
Of every line and trick of his sweet favour.
But now he's gone, and my idolatrous fancy
Must sanctify his relics.

All's Well That Ends Well

Act One, Scene One

lines 81-97

Shakespeare has placed Helen in an Hermetic world, and so no surprise should come from the great reaches of her imagination.

Two scenes later Helen will express to the Countess the belief she can cure the King. She is a healer, as alchemists following Paracelsus often were. Allen G. Debus' excellent book *The English Paracelsians* becomes useful here. Debus carefully explains how the solidly scientific, chemical knowledge of Paracelsus made its way into the working knowledge of English physicians by the close of the Elizabethan age. For the mid sixteenth century, Paracelsus was a brilliantly original chemist, and he often used this knowledge for healing. He hurt his reputation by excessive drinking, wild irresponsible comments on the occult, and a loud obnoxious personality. Debus shows how these negatives were overlooked by English physicians, who held the wisdom to recognize the immense value in Paracelsus' pathbreaking work—he used compounds of herbs, minerals, and metals to heal rather than antique medical texts of two millennia ago.

An Elizabethan audience would have recognized Helen as a follower of the wise, sound, practical Paracelsus. Magic in healing is still implied, because she follows occult lore by

combining, and her methods are secret. Helen does open up, as much as she needs to, in explaining her plan to cure the King to the Countess, Bertram's mother.

HELEN

I will tell truth, by grace itself I swear.
You know my father left me some prescriptions
Of rare and proved effects, such as his reading
And manifest experience had collected
For general sovereignty, and that he willed me
In heedfull' st reservation to bestow them,
As notes whose faculties inclusive were
More than they were in note. Amongst the rest
There is a remedy, approved, set down,
To cure the desperate languishings whereof
The King is rendered lost.

All's Well That Ends Well
Act One, Scene Three
lines 188-228

Helen, in seeking the king's presence, will be rather like Joan of Arc seeing the Dauphin. But both have special powers on their side and they will get there.

The Countess at first discourages Helen for all the obvious reasons. This is a central magical part of the play, for Helen replies with medical hopes strongly tinged with astrology.

COUNTESS

But think you, Helen,
If you should tender your supposed aid,
He would receive it? He and his physicians
Are of a mind: he, that they cannot help him;

They, that they cannot help. How shall they credit
A poor unlearned virgin, when the schools,
Embowelled of their doctrine, have left off
The danger to itself

HELEN

There's something in't
More than my father's skill, which was the great' st
Of his profession, that his good receipt
Shall for my legacy be sanctified
By th' luckiest stars in heaven, and would your honour
But give me leave to try success, I'd venture
The well-lost life of mine on his grace's core
By such a day, an hour.

All's Well That Ends Well

Act One, Scene Three

lines 233-247

Helen's response gains the encouragement of the Countess, who has always lovingly looked at her as a daughter.

Alchemy is connected to healing when Lafeu, the old lord, urges the King to be hopeful, trying to pave the way for Helen's entrance.

LAFEU

I have seen a medicine
That's able to breathe life into a stone,
Quicken a rock, and make you dance canary
With sprightly fire and motion; whose simple touch
Is powerful to araise King Pepin, nay,

To give great Charlemagne a pen in's hand,
And write to her a love-line.

All's Well That Ends Well

Act Two, Scene One
lines 71-77

Medicine in this society clearly has resurrection possibilities, though Lafeu is surely guilty of hyperbole as he wanders so far back in time. The Hermetic imagination will seldom settle for a trite, standardized series of images.

Finally the stage holds only the King and Helen, in disguise. They talk for the next 110 lines, starting at line 109 in Act Two, Scene One. We of course cannot quote the entire passage—what our texts for? —but Helen does use alchemical imagery in what she promises the King.

HELEN

The great'st grace lending grace,
Ere twice the horses of the sun shall bring
Their fiery coacher his diurnal ring,
Ere twice in murk and occidental damp
Moist Hesperus hath quenched her sleepy lamp,
Of four-and-twenty times the pilot's glass
Hath told the thievish minutes how they pass,
What is infirm from your sound parts shall fly,
Health shall live free, and sickness freely die.

All's Well That Ends Well

Act Two, Scene One
lines 160-168

The alembic—glass furnace—has been transformed to cosmic proportions. The practice of alchemy required the constant repetition of smoke rising up the alembic, moving left and right

down its arms till those arms lead to the furnace bottom, where the process starts all over again, endlessly repetitive, an imitation of the cosmic activity Helen describes, or rather the cosmos is in close imitation of her.

Either way the King gets well very quickly, like a finger snap. In the complex symbols of alchemy, the successful completion of an alchemical process was often symbolized by a king, especially by a king rising up out of his grave. The word gold is used several times throughout the play. The first magic-based resurrection in *All's Well* is complete.

The plot will become long and unwieldy before the second rebirth. In simplest terms, the King rewards Helen with Bertram's hand in marriage, but Bertram the soldier flees to the wars to escape consummation. Helen enters a convent, and gives off the false news she has died. Bertram, unconcerned, attempts to seduce a virtuous maiden named Diana. In the bed trick Shakespeare also used in *Measure for Measure*, Helen substitutes herself for Diana, the blundering Bertram doesn't know the difference, rings of identification are exchanged, and Helen is with child. With Helen still thought dead, all the characters of the play come together in the King's court to try figuring out whatever has happened. Not much progress is made, as one might expect, until with less than forty lines in the play left, Helen suddenly returns from the dead. Unlike Hermione's rebirth in *The Winter's Tale*, the characters viewing Helen are given very little to say. Shock and stupefaction must appear on the countenances of all the actors for this closing scene to work. Helen has healed others. Now she has healed herself. She concludes a play where many characters refer to astrology and alchemy; providing a laundry list of all those references would reinforce the points already made, though

prove mind-numbing tedious. Maybe we should leave this play as Helen wants us to, swiftly, with peace and dignity, with no more questions needing to be asked.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Hero makes a more spectacular resurrection than Helen. Hero's rebirth, like Hermione's, brings on a considerable amount of amazed talk among the spectators—both audience and characters on the stage become spectators. Both Hero and Hermione are falsely accused with fornication with forbidden men. We have already told Hermione's story. Hero is about to take her wedding vows when Claudio, her groom-to-be, suddenly turns on her with vicious attacks. Hero's situation is especially desperate because Claudio has two trustworthy witnesses. She collapses, faints, appears near death. When the unruly crowd disperses, the Friar suggests the news spread that Hero truly is dead.

Of course all the many loose ends of the plot will finally come untangled—with the last knot comes Hero's sudden reappearance. The breast-beating, crestfallen Claudio has agreed to marry Hero's cousin, who reportedly looks exactly like her. This duplicity fools no one, least of all Claudio, not for more than a few seconds, and the young lovers are happily reunited. The play ends with Beatrice and Benedick talking up a romantic storm to each other; they always do, and they are the main subjects in most studies of *Much Ado*. Berlioz composed an opera titled, *Beatrice and Benedict*.

Occult imagery exists in this play, though not on a grand scale. Most poignantly, Benedick regrets he cannot compose sonnets to his beloved because he was born under an “unrhyming planet,” Act Five, Scene Two. Two villains talk horoscope astrology in Act One, Scene Three, when Don John tells Conrad in turgid prose, “I wonder that thou—being, as

thou sayst thou art, born under Saturn—goest about to apply a moral medicine to a mortifying mischief.” Dogberry brings back memories of Apuleius; hence the comic constable is called an ass, and can never quite get that word out of his mouth. Again we do not require a laundry list to convince that Renaissance magic was never far from Shakespeare’s pen.

Twelfth Night is built upon the cosmic confusion certain to occur when two twins, of opposite gender, both believed lost at sea, show up years later, same time, same place, on the coastline of Ilyria. Shakespeare’s ability to make characters fall in love at first sight adds to the wild rollicking uncertainties so many characters undergo. In Act One, Scene Five, Viola (dressed as a boy), admiring Olivia but not smitten by her, repeats the content of Shakespeare’s first fourteen sonnets, a concept the bard most likely learned from the final section of Plato’s *Symposium*. Let Viola speak:

VIOLA

’Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white
Nature’s own sweet and cunning hand laid on.
Lady, you are the cruell’st she alive
If you will lead these graces to the grave
And leave the world no copy.

Twelfth Night

Act One, Scene Five

lines 228-232

Shakespeare’s characters fall deeply in love much too quickly, almost at first glance, to practice any form of romantic love as depicted in Plato’s major work on the subject. Yet Shakespeare and Plato would profoundly connect in the sonnets and many other places.

Twelfth Night would not be one. Harold Bloom finds Feste the wisest person in the play, and so perhaps Feste's two-stanza songs on love's vicissitudes holds hidden virtues.

FESTE (sings)

O mistress mine, where are you roaming
O stay and hear, your true love's coming,
That can sing both high and low.
Trip no further, pretty sweeting.
Journeys end in lovers meeting,
Every wise man's son doth know.
What is love? 'Tis not hereafter,
Present mirth hath present laughter.
What's to come is still unsure.
In delay these lies no plenty,
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty.
Youth's a stuff will not endure.

Twelfth Night
Act Two, Scene Three
lines 38-44; 46-51

Feste might sound cynical, bitter perhaps, but he has already watched more than two acts of irresponsible love-play, not to mention the extreme self-love of poor Malvolio, the play's sad ploy, the one character without a happy ending. Perhaps he deserved a better close. Perhaps anybody does.

As the plot get crazier, so does Feste's singing. Hear his brief vocal outburst in Act 4.

FESTE

I am gone, sis,
And anon, sir,
I'll be with you again,

In a trice,
Like to the old Vice,
 Your need to sustain,
Who with dagger of lath
In his rage and his wrath
 Cries ‘Aha,’ to the devil,
Like a mad lad,
‘Pare thy nails, dad,
 Adieu, goodman devil.’

Twelfth Night
Act Four, Scene Two
lines 123-134

Feste closes the play, most appropriately, with lovely, lilting song, by far his longest and most contented effort, which can be left to the reader’s pleasure.

Antonio blames the play’s endless misidentifications on “witchcraft,” Act Five, Scene One, and he might not be wrong. Love at first sight is never done swifter than when Olivia accepts Sebastian as husband, after she truly has done no more than look at him. But Shakespeare might be getting anxious to bring his wondrous comedy to a close, and the characters truly delight in their swift, sudden, totally unexpected recognitions—after all, the married couples will be together for a long time. The boy and girl twins, both thought lost at sea—the sea in Shakespeare is constantly murderous—and they too shall live long in joyous company, the result of a twin resurrection scene

Perhaps why all these comedies can be called occult—in the broadest sense—is Shakespeare ruthlessly tears apart the lives of his characters, sometimes sending them all over the globe or at least Europe, and then, as his magic wand spins and the fifth act closes, bringing them all back safely together. Of

course the magic is always in the language—single critical volumes, are written to analyze a single play—and if the characters, good and bad, wise and foolish, did not speak with the brilliantly imaginative choice of words their creator has given them, nothing occult or theatrical would happen. As Oisino states, Act One, Scene Four, “I know thy constellation is right apt for this affair.”

Chapter Fifty:

The Alchemy in Portia's Venice

Themes of magic can be seen in two favorite Shakespeare plays—*The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*. Both plays have a heroine who must disguise as a young man to pull together the erratic strands of the plot and cause the play to end happily, at least for the young lovers involved. William, a minor rustic character in *As You Like It*, ends the play silently alone, sadly without a lover, though his plight takes place off-stage and does not interfere with the four successful couples, about to wed and celebrate by two poems to Hymen. Rosalind has spent the play working out schemes and devices to bring these four couples together, with her primary emphasis on uniting herself with Orlando. Harold Bloom refers to her as the finest, most splendid female character in western literature. She is busy. If the excellent Professor Bloom had looked harder, he might have found Anna Karenina or several women in Jane Austen.

Of course Rosalind, like her counterpart Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, is a masterful creation. Her brilliant language while cross-dressing brings out the vibrant love

Orlando holds for her, allows her beloved companion Celia to wed, and sets the stage where Silvius, the hopelessly lovesick rustic, can marry Phoebe. Touchstone, the fourth bridegroom, needs no special help to marry his lady.

What matters is Rosalind's help is very special. When the other characters inevitably ask about her great skills in controlling human actions, she responds her talent is "magical." She learned this craft from a nameless uncle. The uncle is unimportant—he likely does not exist—but what comes forth as essential is three times Rosalind refers to herself as "magician." Listen to Rosalind's two prose statements in Act Five, Scene Two, as the play hurtles to a close. "Believe then, if you please, that I can do strange things. I have since I was three years old conversed with a magician, most profound in his art, and yet not damnable." When Orlando asks her (still dressed as a man) if she speaks in "sober meanings," Rosalind is quick to reply, "By my life, I do, which I tender dearly, though I say I am a magician. Therefore put you on your best array, bid your friends, for if you will be married tomorrow, you shall, and to Rosalind if you will."

Rosalind is nothing if not confident. Two scenes later in Act 5, Orlando states how greatly he has been taken in by his cross-dressing companion. A key word in the following quote is "magician," its third application to Rosalind, who will work all her wonders in this same scene.

ORLANDO

My lord, the first time that I ever saw him,
Methought he was a brother to your daughter.
But, my good lord, this boy is forest-born,
And hath been tutored in the rudiments
Of many desperate studies by his uncle,

Whom he reports to be a great magician
Obsure'd in the circle of this forest.

As You Like It

Act Five, Scene Four

lines 28-34

Shakespeare would not have referred to Rosalind three times as “magician” if he did not think it important. Only Prospero is more frequently called magician.

Rosalind is magician as unifier. So many individuals are wandering crazily lost about the forest of Ardenne or permanently banished there by grave injustice. Lovers are separated who should rightly be together, as are family members. The parts of an occult world have split apart, and Rosalind assumes the duty to bring back together as many as she can. What magic she holds is in language. When she puts on her magical costume as cross-dresser, no character can out-talk her, or come close to doing so. She insists Orlando court her as if she was Rosalind, the joke of course being she is Rosalind. Orlando might not be the brightest of Shakespeare’s characters in that he does not see through the disguise. He’s either looking at a twin or a disguise. There cannot be a third option. The men in *The Merchant of Venice* will show the same failing when Portia cross-dresses to rescue them. Orlando is also the worst of Shakespeare’s lovesick poets. His verse praising Rosalind, nailed to trees throughout the forest, is meant to be comical. He will not be charming Rosalind with his intellect. He must be very handsome indeed.

Rosalind, like Portia, can let her images and metaphors range throughout literature and the cosmos. She, again like Portia, is the white magus; she uses language to bring people closer to each other in selfless love and thereby closer to God,

though Rosalind's play is far from religious. Portia's play could not exit without strong religious overtones, which allows for her famous speech on "the quality of mercy." Rosalind exists in a full-blown comedy, undercut with violent scenes of wrestling and death threats, and her swift-paced wit is more memorable than her magic of the closing scenes, because Shakespeare provides so much more of it. Occult language can be about making connections, and few characters do this better than Rosalind. Consider one prose passage that the cross-dresser speaks to the lovesick Orlando.

ROSALIND

Say a day without the ever. No, no Orlando;
men are April when they woo, December when
they wed. Maids are May when they are
maids, but the sky changes when they are
wives. I will be more jealous of thee
than a Barbary cock-pigeon over his hen,
more clamourous than a parrot against
rain, more newfangled than an ape,
more giddy in my desires than a monkey.
I will weep for nothing, like Diana in
the fountain, and I will do that when
you are disposed to be merry. I
will laugh like a hyena, and that
when thou art inclined to sleep.

As You Like It

Act Four, Scene One

lines 138-148

Rosalind is all over God's creation, including a pagan god, in this passage. It can be no wonder that Orlando is confused and flustered. He does not have the printed page before him. But he

is captivated by this virtuosity of language. He never ceases to stay and hear more.

The play has a Biblical quality, outside magic, when the two feuding brothers, Oliver and Orlando, reconcile, after Orlando saved his brother from both a snake and lion. The gentleness of Eden is gone, but so is the fury of Cain and Abel. Orlando could have walked quietly away and left his brother to certain death. But forgiveness is in the air and he chooses the noble option. Duke Frederick also suddenly changes his evil ways, in what can only be called a *dues ex machina* performance, and he too is reconciled to his banished brother, Duke Senior. Shakespeare had to go to some lengths to work out two reconciliations. Rosalind was not involved, though the high spirituality of white magic might be considered. Without these two brotherly reconciliations, the play would have lacked the fully happy ending that comedy required.

Portia's play joins the comic, romantic, and tragic. This essay makes the contention that Shylock, almost always the main interest in *The Merchant of Venice*, was a tragic figure before the play started. The daily barrage of cruel, ruthless anti-Semitism the poor man received is painful to contemplate. Even Antonio, our noble merchant, so loyal and brave to his friends, felt no qualms at spitting on Shylock, a crude appalling act brought on by nothing but the man's race. If Shylock explodes into a wicked destructive hatred towards Antonio, he is far from entirely to blame. A Jew released from Dachau might have little trouble cutting a pound of flesh from his Nazi prison guard.

Shylock receives two especially cruel curses, one from Antonio, followed by Graziano. These outburst occur in the climactic fourth act, shortly before Portia the male lawyer arrives. If Shylock might have considered Portia's lovely speech

on mercy, these two hateful attacks would have stamped out any human feelings Shylock might have towards his enemies. Antonio's speech is an Hermetic piling on of natural images, while Graziano explores the magical world of Pythagoras to insult the Jew.

ANTONIO

I pray you think you question with the Jew.
You may as well go stand upon the beach
And bid the main flood bate his usual height;
You may as well use question with the wolf
Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;
You may as well forbid the mountain pines
To wag their high tops and to make no noise
When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven,
You may as well do anything most hard
As seek to soften that—than which what's harder? —
His Jewish heart.

The Merchant of Venice

Act Four, Scene One

lines 69-79

GRAZANIO

O, be thou damned, inexorable dog,
And for thy life let justice be accused!
Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith
To hold opinion with Pythagoras
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
Governed by a wolf who, hanged for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And, whilst thou lay'st in thy unhallowed dam,
Infused itself in thee; for thy desires

Are wolvish, bloody, starved, and ravenous.

The Merchant of Venice

Act Four, Scene One

lines 127-136

But our study is about magical elements in *The Merchant of Venice*, which might have a distant source in Ficino. We again stress Shakespeare might never have read Ficino, nor heard of him, and yet a strong, prevalent current of widely-varying magical concepts existed in late Elizabethan England. We need to look no further for proof than John Dee and Prospero, that magic wood outside Athens, the tragic belief in witchcraft, and the steadfast popularity in alchemy and astrology. Alchemy will play a major part in *The Merchant*.

Like Rosalind, Portia (and her faithful maid Nerissa) cross-dress, and hurriedly travel from Belmont to Venice to rescue Antonio's life and her husband's reputation. Portia's gifts of language are as great as Rosalind, though of a far different nature. Portia is a Christian, while Rosalind has no expressed religious belief, and her great "quality of mercy" speech, which profoundly moves everyone on stage but Shylock, would be a brilliant paraphrase of several New Testament passages—"let he who has not sinned cast the first stone."

An irony exists in the hesitant, explicit manner Portia (cross-dressed as a wise young attorney) examines the legal document that allows Shylock to kill Antonio. No scholars study a text more closely, scrupulously, with the highest ethics than Jews approaching the Talmud. Yet this time the Jew has read carelessly and that shall cost him dearly. It is Portia who reads the legal brief like a Talmudic scholar, forcefully points out all the weaknesses in Shylock's case—the Jew can cut but

the victim cannot be allowed to bleed—and step by careful step destroys Shylock in the process.

Like Rosalind, Portia has won her battle by language, and she will function as an occult stagemaster in bringing all the characters together, happily to Belmont. Like William in our other play, Antonio is the one character left without a marriage partner. Presumably Shakespeare employed too many loose ends to tie all together, or perhaps white magic requires a little sad lonesome reality to be credible.

Alchemy is the focus of the prolonged casket scene which determines Portia's husband. The rules require Portia's marital fate to be determined by a casket contest devised by her deceased father, with Portia having no say in the matter. The contest consists of three caskets, each representing one of the seven basic metals. The three are gold and silver, the two highest metals, and lead, the lowest. Each metal has a strong astrological association, though this does not come out in the play. Gold is connected with the sun—hence the greatest of metals with the greatest of planetary bodies—and silver is connected with the lovely moon, second of planets. Lead is connected with Saturn, often associated with melancholy but also careful thought, scholarly purpose, wise judgement. Shakespeare's audience could be counted on to know the astrology. Their beloved Queen Elizabeth would not mount her rightful throne in 1558 until her personal astrologer—John Dee—had assured her that all the planets and stars were in their rightful places.

Shakespeare's audience also would have known the strong, spiritual belief system in alchemy. The greedy or wealth-crazed alchemist, who frantically tries in his laboratory to transmute the lower metals into silver and gold, shall never

accomplish that process. Again no metal is lower than lead, with copper, tin, and quicksilver (mercury) being above. To be successful, the alchemist at work must be a prayerful man immersed in deep humility; he must be gladly content with the lower metal and thank his creator for lead. If he wishes for more, he shall never get more. Above all, alchemy is a mental and spiritual discipline. The alchemist's glass furnace, often called an alembic, will often show countless repetitions of the same chemical process, and the successful alchemist, always satisfied with lead or copper, must consider these repetitions to be a steady litany of similar prayers, perhaps the same prayer, but always a prayer of gratitude and piety, never of greed and want. Then and only then does the alchemist have a chance to obtain a precious metal.

Portia's first two courtiers do not know this long-developed alchemical tradition. Alchemy is never mentioned in the casket scenes, but in Shakespeare's age, the mere mention of those three metals would be a clear, almost giveaway sign of it. The courtier Morocco chooses gold, a poor choice for a lover or alchemist; he loses Portia and he must agree never to wed, though the latter is rather unlikely. The courtier Aragon chooses silver, and suffers the same fate for the same reasons. Only Bassanio holds the wisdom to choose lead and win Portia, though this might be the only time in the play he acts with true and careful thought. Shakespeare spends too much verbiage on this casket game. Neither Morocco nor Aragon are great thinkers, and we can be assured they know nothing of Renaissance alchemy.

The play's most beautiful poetry of magic is given to Lorenzo and Jessica, the young lovers who house-sit at Belmont while Portia is away. Jessica is Shylock's daughter, who took

considerable money and jewels when she fled and promises to turn Christian. This does not negate her wondrous love poetry, but perhaps lessens our admiration of her.

Act 5 begins with Lorenzo setting the scene: “The moon shines bright. In such a night as this, / When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees / And they did make no noise.” Lorenzo and Jessica then succinctly recall several lovers from classical literature. They have apparently done some reading before this night began. Stefano, a messenger, breaks their wondrous mood to relate their mistress, Portia, will be back before daybreak.

Lorenzo and Jessica want to stay outside in the rich moonlight. Stefano can handle whatever needs to be done inside, and he can immediately “bring your music forth into the air,” line 53. Lorenzo becomes enraptured in talking bout the music.

LORENZO

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears. Soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica.

The Merchant of Venice

Act Five, Scene One

lines 54-58

After the two lovers sit, Lorenzo utters eight lines that show Shakespeare’s knowledge of Pseudo-Dionysius’ angels moving the planets, Pythagoras’ music of the spheres, the superiority of gold—for what else could the floor of heaven be made of?—and the inability of earthlings to hear the planet’s song, a common magical belief … all this in eight lines.

LORENZO

Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still choiring to the young-eyed cherubims.
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

The Merchant of Venice

Act Five, Scene One

lines 58-65

Lorenzo is not finished. He next invokes Diane "with a hymn." He has fully departed the Christian belief system of Portia. Lorenzo anticipates the music to come from the house, not the planets, and the saddened Jessica reacts.

LORENZO (to the musicians)

Come, lo, and wake Diane with a hymn.
With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear,
And draw her home with music.

(The musicians play)

JESSICA

I am never merry when I hear sweet music.

The Merchant of Venice

Act Five, Scene One

lines 66-69

Lorenzo has a strong, spirited response, somewhat reminiscent of the wild unruly horse in Plato's *Phaedrus*. We are quoting so much from Lorenzo because he is teaching Jessica, as he teaches us, the many interweavings of

Renaissance magic and music. Of course he brings in Orpheus. How could he discuss music's rare powers without him? If Jessica had not been a joyous lover of music before this speech, she will when her lover finishes.

LORENZO

The reason is your spirits are attentive,
For do but note a wild and wanton herd
Or race of youthful and unhandled colts,
Fetching mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud,
Which is the hot condition of their blood,
If they but hear perchance a trumpet sound,
Or any air of music touch their ears,
You shall perceive them make a mutual stand,
Their savage eyes turned to a modest gaze
By the sweet power of music. Therefore, the poet
Did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones, and floods
Since naught to stockish, hard, and full of rage
But music for the time doth change his nature.
The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils.
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.

The Merchant of Venice

Act Five, Scene One

lines 70-88

This love of music is not shared with other characters. If Portia is the play's best poet, Lorenzo proves a close second. It's interesting to note that Shylock is given only 360 lines, and

yet he dominates most productions and scholarship. But our subject is Renaissance magic, and in this respect only, Lorenzo gets the most perfect and hallowed lines.

Chapter Fifty-one:

Eloquent Monsters at Large— *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*

Shakespeare presents two extraordinary villains, Iago in *Othello* and Angelo in *Measure for Measure*. Angelo does not actually kill anyone but he comes close, and he concludes the play with a new bride and his head still on his shoulders. Iago is the devilish catalyst for the deaths of his own faithful wife Emilia—he stabs her—his comrade Roderigo—he stabs him—and the play's powerful protagonist Othello, who stabs both Desdemona and then himself. Cassio, also stabbed by Iago, will recover and replace Othello as military commander of Cyprus. The play concludes with Iago taken away to suffer the most drawn-out heinous tortures the system can provide. This will not bring anybody back to life, and it is small comfort for all the horrors Iago has caused.

Why so much stabbing in *Othello*? By contrast Angelo intends to keep all his crimes at a distance. With the major exception of his intended rape of Isabella, he has no plans of getting his hands dirty. When Angelo sentences Claudio to death for fornication, a far less serious crime than rape, if it can

be even considered a crime at all, he holds no particular grudge against Claudio. It is as if he merely picked the poor unlucky fellow out of the crowd. Angelo intends to rape a particular woman, but to execute a faceless man. Not so with Iago, who holds a strong personal relationship with all his victims. It might be his own self he truly despises, but his fury—yes, his jealousy—is so severe that he takes it out on all in his immediate community.

We know nothing about Iago before his entrance in Act One, so we can infer next to nothing how he got that way. This is not unusual in Shakespeare. We know nothing about what kind of king or husband Lear was. We know very little about Juliet until she meets Romeo. The young lovers in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* have no previous histories. Falstaff could not always have been old and corpulent. Whatever was he like at nineteen when he might have exercised regularly? We can ask these questions and feel them meaningful because Shakespeare's characters come so powerfully to life in the present tense he gives them. Yes, we would like to know more—exactly what books did Prospero read so assiduously when he was Duke of Milan? Our best means is looking into a character's personal imagery.

Or in rare instances, Shakespeare can provide a specified coherence of images to surround the character. Earlier in my text, I referred to Iago as "devilish catalyst." I did not pick the word devilish at random. More than two dozen times Shakespeare applies images of Satan, hellfire, and devil to Iago. From all the destruction of innocent people Iago causes, this might almost seem to be too kind. But if Iago has a little, or perhaps quite a lot, of Satan's powers in him, his wicked strategies, requiring language and one strawberry handkerchief,

are given extra momentum and force, crafty supernal energies that make him near impossible to withstand. We ask what takes hold of poor betrayed Othello, but we might also ask whatever takes place in the mysteriously wicked Iago. When the play starts, Iago holds a good place in society, he has intelligence—not yet misused—he has his health, and he has a lovely devoted wife. Why can none of this adequately satisfy him? That might be the play's greatest mystery. Perhaps rather than manipulating satanic powers, Iago is controlled by them. When all his plots are revealed, trapped in a corner like the vicious rat that he is, Iago has disappointed centuries of playgoers by refusing to explain his ultimate motivations, to hint even slightly who he is.

IAGO

Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.
From this time forth I never will speak word.

Othello

Act Five, Scene Two
lines 309-310

Shakespeare never wrote more precise, cryptic lines. But if we cannot get at the image system of Iago, we must do so for other characters.

Measure for Measure, like the Elizabethan age, does not cohere strictly to one overriding belief system. Isabella's brother Claudio has been sentenced to death for fornication by Vienna's temporary stand-in deputy Angelo. The true ruler, the Duke, has temporarily left Vienna, but will soon return disguised as a friar. He is not a wise statesman, and he is fortunate no catastrophe happens in his absence. His disguise must be exceptionally good, because he does fool everyone. We must assume the actor uses more than one voice.

The Duke has major warning signs about Angelo when he describes him, “Lord Angelo is precise, / Stands at a guard with envy, scarce confesses / That his blood flows, or that his appetite / Is more to bread than stone.” Act One, Scene Three, lines 50 to 54. This is the severe Angelo whom Isabella, a novice nun, must use all her eloquence to beseech for mercy. She is given brief encouragement by Lucio, a bawd, who nevertheless deeply respects the supernal power of her religious vocation and virginity. Lucio begins by suggesting he has not known many virgins and thus holds Isabella very special. An uneducated man, he mixes Christian beliefs with a strong touch of Plato.

LUCIO

'Tis true. I would not—though 'tis my familiar sin
With maids to seem the lapwing, and to jest
Tongue far from heart—play with all virgins so.
I hold you as a thing enskied and sainted
By your renouncement, an immortal spirit,
And to be talked with in sincerity
As with a saint.

Measure for Measure
Act One, Scene Four
lines 30-36

When Isabella pleads before Angelo, she has no idea the ice-blooded deputy is swiftly feeling a passionate lust for her. Early in her argument, she gives a plain straightforward statement of basic Christian doctrine, Catholic or Protestant. This content is rare in Shakespeare, who kept his cards close to his chest in matters of Christian faith. Yet Isabella succinctly states how Christ redeemed all souls from Adam's sin, and

thereby showed mercy. Hence, Isabella strongly argues, Angelo would do wise to do the same.

ISABELLA

Alas, alas!

Why, all the souls that were forfeit once,
And he that might the vantage best have took
Found out the remedy. How would you be
If he which is the top of judgement should
But judge you as you are? O, think on that,
And mercy then will breathe within your lips,
Like man new made.

Measure for Measure

Act Two, Scene Two
lines 74-81

Angelo might be inwardly salivating at the novice nun's lovely appearance—her face, hands, eyes—and her wise, calm manner of speaking, but he responds by stating her brother must die tomorrow.

Isabella now turns desperate, and no doubt looks even more attractive to her persecutor. Her brother's situation is truly desperate. She tries emotion and logic. She pleads the Christian's need to prepare fully for death. She might have known how well Socrates prepared for death, a basic reading in Plato, but does not bring this in.

ISABELLA

Tomorrow? O, that's sudden! Spare him, spare him!
He's not prepared for death. Even for our kitchens
We kill the fowl of season. Shall we serve heaven
With less respect than we do minister
To our gross selves? Good good my lord, bethink you:

Who is it that hath died for this offence?
There's many have committed it.

Measure for Measure

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 85-91

When she asks for pity, the seemingly unfeeling Angelo replies, “I show it most when show justice,” line 102. He coldly repeats, “Your brother dies tomorrow. Be content.”

Isabella is anything but content. She is also an Elizabethan character. She will next move into Roman mythology for her argument, and place Angelo beneath human range—“like an angry ape”—on the Neo-Platonic scale. She knows her Bible well, but she never strays too far from Florence. She spouts angrily at her tormentor, “O, it is excellent / To have a giant’s strength, but it is tyrannous / To use it like a tyrant.” Lines 109 to 111. We quote Isabella in depth because she vividly illustrates the themes of this study, and because these outbursts of eloquence brings Angelo to his knees in hopeless passion.

Why hopeless? Obviously Isabella is a novice nun and cherishes her virginity, more than anyone can imagine at this moment. It is unlikely Angelo has forgotten his previous nuptial obligations to Mariana, but they do exist and will surely come to trouble him. An interesting note: Angelo made those obligations five years ago and cruelly dumped Mariana when she lost her dowry. Is it possible the substitute deputy has felt no romantic passion in the intervening half decade? Could he truly be as cold as others think? Then what a great part for the actress playing Isabella—boy actor in Shakespeare’s day—to arouse this man, to force him into sin he holds most grievous.

After her comments on giants, Isabella moves straight to Jove, the ultimate earth-shaker in Greek myth. She is eclectic. She adds heaven, an angry ape, weeping angels to her outpouring. All Angelo can do is listen and desire.

ISABELLA

Could great men thunder
As Jove himself does, Jove would never be quiet,
For every pelting petty officer
Would use his heaven for thunder, nothing but thunder.
Merciful heaven,
Thou rather with thy sharp and sulphurous bolt
Split'st the unwedgeable and gnarled oak
Than the soft myrtle. But man, proud man,
Dressed in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep, who, with our spleens,
Would all themselves laugh mortal.

Measure for Measure

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 113-126

Isabella next mentions the possibility that Angelo might once have felt the same sexual passions as her condemned brother Claudio, lines 138 to 145. Angelo is trapped by his mounting, overpowering attraction, and states, “I will bethink me. Come again tomorrow,” line 148. If we have been reading our text carefully, Claudio will be dead by tomorrow. But Isabella has been provided a slight lease on hope. She offers Angelo the gift of her prayers, without holding the slightest inkling of what gift he truly desires. Her Christian prayers shall

move through a Neo-Platonic cosmos. The Gospels meet Plotinus.

ISABELLA

Not with fond shekels of the tested gold,
Or stones, whose rate are either rich or poor
As fancy values them; but with true prayers,
That shall be up at heaven and enter there
Ere sunrise, prayers from preserved souls,
From fasting maids whose minds are dedicate
To nothing temporal.

Measure for Measure

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 153-159

Angelo responds in long soliloquys about his fierce attraction. He would risk bringing his own world toppling down on top of him for a night with Isabella, who will never suspect this till he makes his dastardly crude proposal. Early in his second meeting with Isabella, he tries to wax poetic in a strange convoluted comparison of fornication to alchemy, or the rich coinage that results from successful alchemy. Alchemy or magic was often used to lure a lover.

ANGELO

Ha, fie, these filthy vices! It were as good
To pardon him that hath from nature stolen
A man already made, as to remit
Their saucy sweetness that do coin God's image
In stamps that are forbid. 'Tis all as easy
Falsely to take away a life true made

As to put metal in restrained moulds,
To make a false one.

Measure for Measure

Act Two, Scene Four
lines 42-49

An act later, we learn more about Angelo, perhaps his weird supernal birth that destined him for evil, or perhaps this is but a foolish rumor. The bawd Lucio, not the most reliable of sources, does the talking.

LUCIO

Some report a sea-maid spawned him,
some that he was begot between two
stockfishes. But it is certain that when
he makes water his urine is congealed
ice; that I know to be true. And he is a
motion ungenerative; that's infallible.

Measure for Measure

Act Three, Scene One
lines 371-376

Regardless of Angelo's difficulty in the privy, Isabella will have no part of his sexual exchange: the treasures of her body for her brother's life. She would rather Claudio die, leaving behind a loving woman bearing his child, than allow Angelo to run his hands over her naked person. Many critics have formed an intense dislike of Isabella for taking this uncompromising decision. Granted, her choice might appear close to laughable in advanced western cultures in the twenty-first century. But Isabella stood on the stage four centuries ago. Her goal is for Claudio and herself to arrive safely in heaven. Here Puritan Christian doctrine is a strong undercurrent, which

Isabella strictly adheres to. With souls on the line—and this is her primary issue—she is far closer to Paul than Plotinus.

Should she surrender her body to Angelo, her soul is irrevocably lost, and while Claudio lives, his soul might not be in such good shape either. An added point of major importance: had Isabella surrendered at first asking, with no stubbornness, no fighting spirit, Shakespeare would not have had a play, or at least not more than half a play that audience members would have wondered what they paid their coins for. This so-called problem play would indeed be a problem. True, the ending would find the troubled brother-sister act destined for heavenly glory, but Claudio's child grows up without a father and Mariana, our patient Grizelda, never does get her man back.

We might conclude this play with more problems facing Isabella's decision, the hinge-point. She might live in a convent, where all her social contacts are virgins or presumed to be, but Claudio holds strong, pagan—certainly not Christian—notions about the afterlife. He contemplates his immediate death and feels ghastly fears. Shakespeare gives the pagans the greater poetry, but this will never show what side of the age's crucial issues he came down on.

CLAUDIO

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod, and the dilated spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst

Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling—’tis too horrible!
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

Measure for Measure

Act Three, Scene One

lines 118-132

In the final act, the returning Duke makes all things right. He might remind readers of Rosalind in this ringmaster role. Rosalind is called a magus three times in *As You Like It*, and each appellation is meant as high compliment. This could never be said for the Duke, who caused so many of the problems he was later forced to rectify. His final speeches show him asking Isabella, still dressed as a novice nun, for her hand in marriage. The text gives no clear answer to her response. But this reader can hope that Isabella, for one resounding last time, will say no.

Othello is not overflowing with magical images, but those that occur are essential and often sustained. Brabantio learns from Iago—who else?—that his daughter Desdemona has eloped and married Othello, a much older man, a war hero but with unacceptable black skin. Till this extreme event, Brabantio had always ruled his daughter with an iron hand. His only possible explanation is the dark Moor worked an evil dark magic on his innocent, inexperienced, young daughter. Otherwise the daughter he proudly raised would not have made such a headstrong, foolish, degrading marriage. Brabantio rants about magic and orders the black war hero arrested.

BRABANZIO

O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?
Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Whether maid so tender, fain, and happy,
So opposite to marriage that she shunned
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
Would ever have, t'incur a general mock,
Run from her guardage to thy sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight.
Judge me the world if 'tis not gross in sense
That thou hast practiced on her with foul charms,
Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals
That weakens motion. I'll have't disputed on.
'Tis probable, and palpable to thinking.
I therefore apprehend and do attack thee
For an abuser of the world, a practiser
Of arts inhibited and out of warrant.
(To officers) Lay hold upon him. If he do resist,
Subdue him at his peril.

Othello

Act One, Scene Two

lines 63-82

One would think Brabantio had run out of breath from this passage, but he repeats the subject matter. Had he been convincing enough to annul the marriage, we would have no play.

Othello takes his new father-in-law's vocabulary and turns it right back at him.

OTHELLO

Yet, by your gracious patience,
I will around unvarnished tale deliver.
Of my whole course of love, what drugs, what charms,
What conjuration and what mighty magic —
For such proceeding I am charged withal —
I won his daughter.

Othello

Act One, Scene Three
lines 89-93

Othello's defense is long and convincing. As to Desdemona, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them. / This only is the witchcraft I have used."

Othello and Desdemona's marriage is never to have a moment free from crisis or problems. After they convince the court in Venice that Othello is not a witch—a man could be a witch in Renaissance times—they sail to Cyprus for Othello's military assignment. Shakespeare never seems to miss an opportunity for a storm at sea, and the poor newlyweds find themselves trapped in one. Yet the divine beauty of Desdemona calms the storm around her. Cassio does the talking, and allows beauty to reach the supernal height found in Plato. In no way could this be regarded as a Christian passage.

CASSIO

He's had most favourable and happy speed.
Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,
The guttered rocks and congregated sands,
Traitors ensteeped to enclog the guiltless keel,
As having sense of beauty do omit

Their mortal natures, letting go safely by
The divine Desdemona.

Othello

Act Two, Scene One
lines 68-74

The enemy Turks do not fare so well at storms at sea. A nameless Second Gentleman, a gifted poet, as so often happens among Shakespeare's minor characters, describes the Turks' destruction in cosmic terms. The storm must be truly remarkable, or supernal, because the Turks were positioned on the shore.

SECOND GENTLEMAN

A segregation of the Turkish fleet;
For do but stand upon the foaming shore,
The children billow seems to pelt the clouds,
The wind-shaked surge with high and monstrous mane
Seems to cast water on the burning Bear
And quench the guards of th' over-fixed pole.
I never did like molestation view,
On the enchafed flood.

Othello

Act One, Scene Three
lines 10-17

These two storms, threatening Desdemona and slaughtering the Turks, occur in the first act and set the mood for the play: unexpected violence, impossible to defend, from the most unexpected of sources.

Within the alchemical belief system, metals can be made poisonous. Horrid stories of the Borgia family are history's most glaring example. Iago also considers the poison that can be

worked into metals when he considers his own wife would have mated with Othello and rages, “the thought whereof / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards,” Act Two, Scene One, lines 295-296. Of course Iago knows this vile event never occurred, but he needs to justify his coming monstrous behavior to Roderigo, the not-too-bright, all-too-willing accomplice. Iago will soon manipulate Roderigo into a sword duel with Cassio, ever innocent and always sinking ever deeper in trouble. Othello appears, all powerful, and wants immediate answers. Iago’s deceptive act is convincing. He grasps at straws for an explanation, and then blurts out an astrological possibility, “As if some planet had outwitted men.” Act Two, Scene Two, line 175. Iago’s deceit will venture into many sources. If he could not think fast on his feet, he would not be so adept at tripping others.

Iago has a soliloquy in Act Two, where he takes thirty lines to explicate his wicked scheme to trap Cassio and thereby his officer Othello and wife. Iago speaks of deception, how darkest hell—his residence—can first appear heavenly. The reader is reminded of Hamlet’s dilemma of the devil having power to assume a pleasing shape. Iago declares himself this very kind of devil. Othello frequently calls him “honest.” This total ability to deceive, to turn the Neo-Platonic hierarchy on its head, makes Iago so lethal in his plotting.

IAGO

She's framed as fruitful
As the free elements; and then for her
To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,
His soul is so enfettered to her love
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,

Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function. How am I then a villain,
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell:
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now; for whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear;

Othello

Act Two, Scene Three

lines 332-347

This quotation is but one instance of many that connect Iago with images of Satan or hellfire. His evil is contrasted to the sublime virtue of Desdemona, his ultimate victim, who forgives her husband even during his most outrageous behavior.

When Desdemona loses her strawberry handkerchief, the most innocent of mistakes, she finds her husband's strange suspicions and inexplicable anger mounting. This handkerchief contains strong magic, or so Othello believes, and we must quote all his commentary.

OTHELLO

That's a fault. That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give.
She was a charmer, and could almost read
The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it
'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it,
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt

After new fancies. She dying, gave it me,
And bid me, when my fate would have me wived,
To give it her. I did so, and take heed on't.
Make it a darling, like your precious eye.
To lose't or give't away were such perdition
As nothing else could match.

Othello

Act Three, Scene Four
lines 55-68

Desdemona has a brief, startled response to this sustained outburst, "Is't possible?" line 68. Then the maddened Othello charges forward.

OTHELLO

'Tis true. There's magic in the web of it.
A sibyl that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses
In her prophetic fury sewed the work.
The worms were hallowed that did not breed silk,
And it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful
Conserved of maidens' hearts.

Othello

Act Three, Scene Four
lines 68-74

Desdemona, stunned, can but ask, "I'faith, is't true?" For her, it is all too true. The connection of Egypt and magic is important. Othello's mother might not be a student of Thrice-Great Hermes, but the play's audience would and might believe the troubling handkerchief did contain a touch of supernal power.

When Desdemona shares her concerns over her husband's uncivilized behavior with her lady-in-waiting Emilia

(wife to Iago), the tormented innocent moves up and down the Neo-Platonic hierarchy in trying to understand. She oh so desperately wants to understand.

DESDEMONA (exit Iago)

Something sure of state,
Either from Venice or some unhatched practice
Made demonstrable here in Cyprus to him,
Hath muddled his clear spirit; and in such cases
Men's natures wrangle with inferior things,
Though great ones are their object. 'Tis even so;
For let our finger ache and it indues
Our other, beautiful members even to a sense
Of pain. Nay, we must think men are not gods,
Nor of them look for such observancy
As fits the bridal. Beshrew me much, Emilia,
I was—unhandsome warrior as I am—
Arraigning his kindness with my soul;
But now I find I had suborned the witness,
And he's indicted falsely.

Othello

Act Three, Scene Four
lines 138-152

This passage often goes overlooked. Desdemona is ostensibly a Christian, but she does not seek answers within a Christian framework. She is deeply tinged with the ancient pagan world that produced Neo-Platonism. Her main Christian trait is her seemingly endless capacity to forgive.

Othello also holds a belief system grounded in the ancient paganism that allowed Neo-Platonism to set forth a vast cosmos, not all out of reach of men. In Act Four, Scene Two, Desdemona, now desperate, asks her husband, “Alas, what

ignorant sin have I committed?" line 72. Othello, transfixed with confusion and rage, yet still a poet, responds:

OTHELLO

Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,
Made to write 'whore' upon? What committed?
Committed? O thou public commoner,
I should make very forges of my cheeks,
That would to cinders burn up modesty,
Did I but speak thy deeds. What committed?
Heavens stop the nose at it, and the moon winks;
The bawdy wind, that kisses all it meets,
Is hushed within the hollow mine of earth
And will not hear't. What committed?

Othello

Act Four, Scene Two

lines 73-82

Othello will moments later transfer the satanic powers of Iago to his most innocent wife, "You, mistress, / That have the office opposite to Saint Peter / And keeps the gates of hell," lines 94-96. Othello is epileptic, though this time he avoids a fit.

Othello strangles Desdemona, the horrific tragedy that can never be undone—and in his imponderable grief and mind-splitting guilt, the great warrior does find the appropriate cosmic imagery.

OTHELLO

O insupportable, O heavy hour!
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse

Of sun and moon, and that th' affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration.

Othello

Act Five, Scene Two
lines 107-110

Othello might next be standing in stark disbelief at his cruel violent act till Emilia enters and reinforces his catastrophic reality. He returns to the cosmos to respond.

OTHELLO

It is the very error of the moon,
She comes more nearer earth than she was wont,
And makes men mad.

Othello

Act Five, Scene Two
lines 118-120

Desdemona utters, “A guiltless death I die,” line 132. What remains are more deaths and more tragedies. The hope of the play dies with Desdemona. No handkerchief, even if handled by Thoth himself, can save this play after her brave, prolonged passing.

Chapter Fifty-two:

The Making of the King—The Three Plays of the Henriad

Shakespeare creates three masterly historic plays to tell the transformation of Prince Hal, frequenter of taverns and friend of Falstaff, into the mighty warrior King Henry V. Most attention in these plays is given to Falstaff's wondrous comic eloquence and King Harry V's stirring battle rhetoric, often used by England during emergency times of the second world war. Yet all three plays contain superb poetry of the occult or magic, particularly in reference to omens and prophecies. Dame Fortune is never far from these historic characters, who are far more given to talk than battle.

Hal's father, King Henry IV, opens the trilogy with reference to Aristotle's cosmology that all forms in heaven are made of the same substance. Henry IV combines this belief in the Hermetic microcosm-macrocosm: as above, so below.

KING HENRY

Those opposed eyes,
Which, like the meteors of a troubled heaven,
All of one nature, of one substance bred,
Did lately meet in the intestine shock

And furious close of civil butchery,
Shall now in mutual well-beseeming ranks
March all one way, and be no more opposed
Against acquaintance, kindred, and allies.

Henry IV, Part One

Act One, Scene One

lines 9-16

The king is wrong to believe peace will prevail upon the land. For his entire reign, the two plays bearing his name, he shall be haunted and face fierce military opposition for the manner he took the crown, the deposition and slaying of King Richard II. Henry IV has violated hierarchy, and in Shakespeare, that shall never go unpunished.

His son Hal still spends his time in bawdry taverns, and the king wishes Hal could be more like the audacious, valiant rebel Hotspur, even going so far as wishing futilely a switch at birth.

KING HENRY

O, that it could be proved
That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged
In cradle clothes our children where they lay,
And called mine Percy, his Plantagenet?
Then would I have his Harry, and be mine.

Henry IV, Part One

Act One, Scene One

lines 84-89

This fairy exists more in the King's imagination than that wood outside Athens. Yet the supernal is a subtle part of the play's belief system. The King, for instance, strongly believes he shall die in Jerusalem, come what may.

Falstaff's opening line relates to a subject he is likely to have little use for, "Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?" Act One, Scene Two, line 1. Hal responds that Falstaff has no use for the time of day, and the corpulent sage talks of basic astrology, showing how well the subject was known. "Hal, for we that take purses go by the moor and the seven stars, and not by Phoebus, he, 'that wand' ring knight so fair." Act One, Scene Two, lines 13-14.

Falstaff next compares thievery at night to being "Diana's foresters," and "minions of the moon," lines 25-26. Falstaff does not pour over books. If he knows these various facets of astrology, it can be assumed most people do. Falstaff is the great communicator. His audience, in the tavern or the spectators' gallery, must always know what he's saying.

Hal's future as king is not without hope, though early in Act One of play one, this can only be known by the paid audience, who hear Hall thinking out loud while alone on stage. We have a minor soliloquy, filled with traces of alchemical imagery.

PRINCE HARRY

Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted he may be more wondered at
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.

Henry IV, Part One
Act One, Scene Two
lines 192-200

We quote the soliloquy's first part. "Base" is an alchemical term, referring to inferior metals like lead and tin. The sun can transform these base metals into gold, the highest metal, the material of a king's crown, the highest form of matter. In the alchemical furnace, made of glass, so the process can be witnessed, the base metal sends off fumes and smoke during its transformation. Hence Hal refers to "the foul and ugly mists / of vapours."

The middle section of this soliloquy is not alchemical. Hal reflects on what a pleasant surprise his transformation will be. Then he promptly concludes his alchemical image.

PRINCE HARRY

And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.

Henry IV, Part One

Act One, Scene Two

lines 209-212

The bright metal that glitters is gold. For confirmation recall Hal's previous use of the sun, the star associated with gold. Hal might have thought the sun a planet—he fought his personal battles long before Copernicus—but his message endures.

In Act One, Scene Three, line 82, King Henry IV refers to his threatening enemy from the west as "that great magician, damned Glyndwr." The King is not using "magician" as slang but as reference to Glyndwr's supposed, extraordinary supernal powers. Glyndwr will prove the military dud in the trilogy, a large firecracker that never quite goes off, but this is not yet known.

Moving forward to Act Three, Scene One, before a shot has been fired, a vigorous debate takes place between Glyndwr and Hotspur. Glyndwr speaks of remarkable supernal portents that took place at his birth, and Hotspur strongly disagrees. (We are briefly reminded of the debate over astrology between Edgar and Edmund in *King Lear*.) We quote generously from Glyndwr and Hotspur, because both show rare poetic gifts, often forgotten with the well-deserved attention Falstaff accumulates, and because this debate holds the most extensive magical poetry in the trilogy. Glyndwr begins:

GLYNDWR

I cannot blame him. At my nativity
The front of heaven was full of fiery shapes,
Of burning cressets; and at my birth
The frame and huge foundation of the earth
Shaked like a coward.

Henry IV, Part One

Act Three, Scene One

lines 12-16

Hotspur is quick to reply:

HOTSPUR

Why, so it would have done
At the same season if your mother's cat
Had but kittened, though yourself had never been born.

Henry IV, Part One

Act Three, Scene One

lines 16-19

The two rivals in magic continue the debate with one-or-two liners that repeat their strongly held position. Hotspur, for a soldier, is an excellent poet, but so are most of Shakespeare's

soldiers. When Glyndwr keeps stubbornly insisting, “The heavens were all on fire, the earth did tremble—” (line 23); Hotspur gives a boldly spirited response of eleven lines.

HOTSPUR

O, then the earth shook the heavens on fire,
And not in fear of your nativity.
Disease'd nature oftentimes breaks forth
In strange eruptions; oft the teeming earth
Is with a kind of colic pinched and vexed
By the imprisoning of unruly wind
Within her womb, which for enlargement striving
Shakes the old beldam earth, and topples down
Steeple and moss-grown towers. At your birth
Our grandma earth, having this distemp'rature,
In passion shook.

Henry IV, Part One

Act Three, Scene One

lines 23-33

Glyndwr gives one more extended response, but the verbal combatants are growing weary. Glyndwr claims “to command the devil,” line 54. Hotspur prefers to shame the devil by the simple act of truth-telling. Mortimer puts an end to the debate, “Come, come, no more of this unprofitable chat,” line 60.

But Hotspur is still angry. That might be his most severe problem, how often his is angry or rather how often he takes matters to extremes. If he did not speak so well, he would not be quite so interesting. His wife, Lady Percy, suffers bad dreams as omens of her husband's fate in battle. Act Two, Scene Four, lines 37-64.

Back in Act One, he feels confident to conquer the Neo-Platonic cosmos, top to bottom. Attaining lasting honor will be that easy for him.

HOTSPUR

By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon,
Or dive into the bottom of the deep,
Where fathom line could never touch the ground,
And pluck up drowne'd honour by the locks,
So he that doth redeem her thence might wear,
Without corrival, all her dignities.
But out upon this half-faced fellowship?

Henry IV, Part One
Act One, Scene Three
lines 199-206

Hotspur can apply this same impressive use of language in maintaining a grudge against Glendwr.

MORTIMER

I cannot choose. Sometime he angers me
With telling me of the moldwarp and the ant,
Of the dreamer and his prophecies,
And of a dragon and a finless fish,
A clip-wing'd griffin and a moulten raven,
A couching lion and a ramping cat,
And such a deal of skimble-skamble stuff,
As puts me from y faith. I tell you what;
He held me last night at least nine hours
In reckoning up the several devils' names
That were his lackeys. I cried 'hum!' and 'well, go to,'
But mark'd him not a word. O he is as tedious

As a tired horse, a railing wife,
Worse than a smoky house. I had rather live
With cheese and garlic in a windmill, far,
Than feed on cates and have him talk to me,
In any summer-house in Christendom.

Henry IV, Part One

Act Three, Scene One

lines 147-164

Hotspur is losing significant sleep over his anger. Perhaps this time he had need for concern. In Act Four, Scene Four, the mighty Glyndwr refuses to show up for battle, “overruled by prophecies,” line 18. This means the troops under his command will also fail to appear. In the second Henry IV play, Glendwr dies in a single line, not worth a short stanza. In spite of all his bravado talking, he has been less than useless when battle commences. One cannot help but find Falstaff, an admitted thief, liar, and coward, a far more admirable personage.

Northumberland, Hotspur’s aging father, was meant to lead a large force into battle against King Henry IV. But Northumberland falls grievously ill and, like Glyndwr, his troops will not appear. Hotspur ruminates. He mentions “conjunction,” an astrological term, and “fortune.” He has already heard Worcester say, “I would the state of time had first been whole,” Act Four, Scene One, line 25. Hotspur gives an immediate response, “Sick now? Droop now? This sickness doth infect / The very life-blood of our enterprise.” lines 28-29. He talks more and becomes reflective.

HOTSPUR

Yet doth he give us bold advertisement
That with our small conjunction we should on,
To see how fortune is disposed to us;

Henry IV, Part One

Act Four, Scene One
lines 36-38

Hotspur is correct. With two-thirds of his military forces—Glyndwr and Northumberland—unavailable for battle, the rebel chances look grim indeed. Hotspur will die a brave death, and temporary peace comes to the King and Hal.

The second part of *Henry IV* focuses on Northumberland, still gravely ill, who must wade through barriers of false rumours to learn his son Hotspur has died in battle and the King's forces have emerged triumphant. Northumberland responds with what might appear a strange passage: he was gravely ill and now the horrid news has cured him. But how? A Renaissance medical belief, stemming from Paracelsus, indicates that like cures like. Hence an avalanche of ill news has cured the ill nobleman. But let him explain.

NORTHUMBERLAND

For this I shall have time enough to mourn.
In poison there is physic; and these news,
Having been well, that would have made me sick,
Being sick, have in some measure made one well;
And, as the wretch whose fever-weakened joints,
Like strengthless hinges, buckle under life,
Impatient of his fits, breaks like a fire
Out of his keeper's arms, even so my limbs,
Weakened with grief, being now enraged with grief,

Are thrice themselves.

(He casts away his crutch)

Hence therefore, thou nice crutch!

A scaly gauntlet now with joints of steel

Must glove this hand.

(He snatches off his coif)

And hence, thou sickly coif!

Henry IV, Part Two

Act One, Scene One

lines 136-147

But without pausing for breath, the recovered Northumberland has more to say. He becomes the Neo-Platonic who connects heaven and earth, macrocosm and microcosm, in vivid hopes that violence will overtake the victorious king. Let rebellion not be a “ling’ring act,” but a full-scale endless mission, and give each rebel the wicked violence of “first-born Cain.” We quote in full.

NORTHUMBERLAND

Let heaven kiss earth! Now let not nature’s hand
Keep the wild flood confined! Let order die!
And let this world no longer be a stage
To feed contention in a ling’ring act;
But let one spirit of the first-born Cain
Reign in all bosoms, that each heard being set
On bloody courses, the rude scene may end,
And darkness be the burier of the dead!

Henry IV, Part Two

Act One, Scene One

lines 153-160

Northumberland is correct to bring religious nuances into this play, for the two warring sides hold spiritual values

that urge them onward. Christianity and Plato can be mixed in these beliefs. Morton describes how the “gentle” Archbishop of York, a rebel, has turned the revolt into religion.

MORTON

But now the Bishop
Turns insurrection to religion.
Supposed sincere and holy in his thoughts,
He's followed both with body and with mind,
And doth enlarge his rising with the blood
Of fair King Richard, scraped from Pomfret stones;
Derives from heaven his quarrel and his cause;
Tells them he doth betride a bleeding land
Gasping for life under great Bolingbroke;
And more and less do flock to follow him.

Henry IV, Part Two

Act One, Scene One

lines 199-208

Heaven and earth are boldly, shamelessly linked in Neo-Platonic fashion. As long as Henry IV holds the throne, Richard II can never be forgotten. In the Archbishop’s terms, the sin of Richard II’s death must be purged from the land for peace and harmony to be possibilities.

Lady Percy enters her spiritual beliefs in recalling the all-too-soon death of her husband Hotspur. She is also incensed at the war that killed her beloved and the cruel foolish need for all future wars. She addresses Hotspur’s parents, who perhaps do not grieve enough.

LADY PERCY

When your own Percy, when my heart’s dear Harry,
Threw many a northward look to see his father

Bring up his powers; but he did long in vain.
Who then persuaded you to stay at home?
There were two honours last, yours and your son's.
For yours, the God of heaven brighten it!
For his, it stuck upon him as the sun
In the grey vault of heaven, and by his light
Did all the chivalry of England move
To do brave acts. He was indeed the glass
Wherein the noble youth did dress themselves.
He had no legs that practised not his gait;
And speaking thick, which nature made him blemish,
Became the accents of the valiant;
For those who could speak low and tardily
Would turn their own perfection to abuse
To seem like him. So that in speech, in gait,
In diet, in affections of delight,
In military rules, humours of blood,
He was the mark and glass, copy and book,
That fashioned others. And him—O wondrous him!
O miracle of men!—him did you leave,
Second to none, unseconded by you,
To look upon the hideous god of war
In disadvantage, to abide a field
Where nothing but the sound of Hotspur's name
Did seem defensible; so you left him.
Never, O never do his ghost the wrong
To hold your honour more precise and nice
With others than with him. Let them alone.

Henry IV, Part Two

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 11-41

Lady Percy is spiritual, but not necessarily Christian. God in heaven and the sun are both brought together as brightening factors. Her husband's Neo-Platonic virtues move from earth to the vault of heaven, then back again where he was once adulated and imitated by young admirers. Hotspur is a "ghost," who shall never be wronged again. "The hideous god of war," obviously Mars, bright red like blood on battlefields, shall never be turned loose again. If only—

King Henry IV, well into his second play, holds the magical wish that he could see into his political-military future. Warwick, his loyal supporter, is not worried about Northumberland's strange, unexpected recovery and states, "My lord Northumberland will soon be cooled," Act Three, Scene One, line 43. But Henry IV wants far more consolation. He turns poetic, a rarity, and desires supernal apparitions to foretell mundane events.

KING HENRY

O God, that one might read the book of fate,
And see the revolution of the times
Make mountains level, and the continent,
Weary of solid firmness, melt itself
Into the sea; and other times to see
The beachy girdle of the ocean
Too wide for Neptune's hips; how chance's mocks
And changes fill the cup of alteration
With divers liquors!

Henry IV, Part Two

Act Three, Scene One

lines 44-52

King Henry soon learns Glyndwr is dead. Warwick hopes, rather in vain, this will comfort the King, though Glyndwr's only military strength has been talking.

Ill health, notably swoons, and leadership pressures have taken a toll on Henry IV. Not even the overthrow of Northumberland can cheer him. He laments how the rigors of fortune never work out quite right for him.

KING HENRY

And wherefore should these good news make me sick?
Will fortune never come with both hands full,
But write her fair words still in foulest letters?
She either gives a stomach and no food—
Such are the poor in health—or else a feast,
And takes away the stomach—such are the rich,
That have abundance and enjoy it not.
I should rejoice now at this happy news,
And now my sight fails, and my brain is giddy.
O me! Come near me now; I am much ill.

Henry IV, Part Two

Act Four, Scene Three

lines 103-112

The King swoons after speaking. He has all but done himself in.

While he rests, Gloucester and Clarence continue the strong motif of omens that runs throughout the Henriad.

GLOUCESTER

The people fear me, for they do observe
Unfathered heirs and loathy births of nature.
The seasons change their manners, as the year
Had found some months asleep and leaped them over.

Henry IV, Part Two

Act Four, Scene Three

lines 121-124

CLARENCE

The river hath thrice flowed, no ebb between,
And the old folk, time's doting chronicles,
Say it did so a little time before
That our great grandshire Edward sicked and died.

Henry IV, Part Two

Act Four, Scene Three

lines 125-128

Gold is used several times in different connotations in an extended scene between King Henry and Prince Hal, Act Four, Scene Three, lines 150-305. We can hardly quote all this, but can give specific examples. Hal remarks on the “golden care,” line 154, that has robbed his father of sleep. Hal continues, “This is a sleep / That from this golden rigol hath divorced / So many English kings,” lines 166-168. King Henry awakes to find his golden crown missing from his pillow and sadly exclaims, “See sons, what things you are, / How quickly nature falls into revolt / When gold becomes her object!” lines 194-196. The King next mentions “strange-achieved gold,” line 201, a reference to theft, monarchy, and alchemy. Prince Hal adequately defends himself in terms of gold, “Therefore thou best of gold art worst of gold,” line 289. Hal loves his father far

more than gold and perhaps, with some sadness, far more than Falstaff.

In this same extended scene, the King refers back to omens. He had been predicated to die in Jerusalem, and assumed this meant the holy city in the mideast. Instead he will die in a royal chamber, in London, called Jerusalem.

KING HENRY

Laud be to God! Even there my life must end.
It hath been prophesied to me many years
I should not die but in Jerusalem,
Which vainly I supposed the Holy Land;
But bear me to that chamber; there I'll lie,
In that Jerusalem shall Harry die.

Henry IV, Part Two

Act Four, Scene Three

lines 364-369

He is satisfied. He has made his peace. He will leave his crown in excellent, worthy hands.

Henry V, the play with Hal as monarch, is held together structurally by a Chorus that keeps appearing with historic information that can only take place in the audience's imagination. Admirers of the *Hermetica* would admire this Chorus, who speaks thirty to forty lines at a time.

He opens the play by stating, "And let us, ciphers to this great account, / On your imaginary forces work," lines 17-18. This is the Hermetic method, transferring the audience from place to place, from time to time.

The Chorus is Hermetic in his next appearance at the start of Act Two, not listed as a scene. He jokes with the audience about a stomach ache from all the jostling and moving

about. But the audience had better pay attention, for the lines come fast and furious, just as the action.

CHORUS

Linger your patience on, and we'll digest
Th' abuse of distance, force—perforce—a play.
The sum is paid, the traitors are agreed,
The King is set from London, and the scene
Is now transported, gentles, to Southampton.
There is the playhouse now, there you must sit,
And thence to France shall we convey you safe,
And bring you back, charming the narrow seas
To give you gentle pass—for if we may
We'll not offend one stomach with our play—
But till the King come forth, and not till then,
Unto Southampton do we shift our scene.

Henry V

Chorus – Act Two

lines 31-42

The wickedly wonderful Chorus is back to start Act Three by proclaiming, “Thus with imagined wings our swift scene flies / In motion of no less celerity / Than that of thought,” lines 1-3. In line 7, he adds, “Play with your fancies.” In line 25, he reinforces these positive notions, “Work, work, your thoughts, and therein see a siege.” This is not work for slackers. Alertness is all. Imagination must be ever trustful, ever ready.

The Chorus is ever expansive, entering a vast Neo-Platonic cosmos to start Act Four, when he states, “Now entertain conjecture of a time / When creeping murmur and the posing dark / Fills the wide vessel of the universe.” In line 43, he refers to the King in sublime cosmic imagery, “A largers universal, like the sun.” The Chorus is brief only at the end of

Act Five to close the play, with references to the kingship of Henry VI, whom Shakespeare has already covered in an early trilogy of history plays, as his ever alert audience would well know.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is far closer to Plato's Diotima than the Gospels when he expounds on Hal's momentous transformation upon taking the throne. The angel is the one Christian image.

CANTERBURY

The courses of his youth promised it not.
The breath no sooner left his father's body
But that his wildness, mortified in him,
Seemed to die too. Yea, at that very moment
Consideration like an angel came
And whipped th' offending Adam out of him,
Leaving his body as a paradise,
T' envelop and contain celestial spirits.
Never was such a sudden scholar made;
Never same reformation in a flood
With such a heady currance scouring faults;
Nor never Hydra-headed willfulness
So soon did lose his seat—and all at once—
As in this king.

Henry V

Act One, Scene One

lines 15-38

Canterbury also compares the government to a bee hive in a passage much too long to quote. This occurs in Act One, Scene Two, lines 184 to 220. Each person, like the type of bee, has a place to remain in. There shall be no rebellion or chaos in this kingdom.

King Harry imitates the Chorus when he threatens the besieged French people of Harfleur. His threats must vividly resound in the French imaginations to be effective. Henry V is a king who can be both merciful and outrageously cruel. He allows his old tavern friends Bardolph and Nim to hang, not exactly Christian thinking.

KING HARRY

Therefore, you men of Harfleur,
Take pity of your town and of your people
Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command,
Whiles yet the cool and temperate winds of grace
O'er blows the filthy and contagious clouds
Of heady murder, spoil, and villainy.
If not—why, in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverenced heads dashed to the walls;
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughter men.
What say you? Will you yield, and this avoid?
Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroyed?

Henry V

Act Three, Scene Three

lines 110-126

Shakespeare might like us to close our discussion of the Henriad with a prose quotation from a commoner, in this instance Fluellen, who describes Dame Fortune in clear though

rowdy emblematic language, easy to be understood and pondered by all cast members.

FLUELLEN

By your patience, Ensign Pistol: Fortune is painted blind, with a muffler afore her eyes, to signify to you that Forune is blind. And she is painted also with a wheel, to signify to you—which is the moral of it—that she is turning and inconstant and mutability and variation. And her foot, look you, is fixed upon a spherical stone, which rolls and rolls and rolls. In good truth, the poet makes a most excellent description of it; Fortune is an excellent moral.

Henry V
Act Three, Scene Six
lines 28-36

Chapter Fifty-Three:

Structure of the Cosmos—*Troilus and Cressida*

To an Englishman living during the long reign of Elizabeth I and James, no greater literary work existed than Chaucer's brilliant narrative poem *Troilus and Cressida*, with Chaucer's mastery of a single complex sonnet form used to tell the tale. Hence Shakespeare found himself in serious competition when he composed his play *Troilus and Cressida*, about the two Trojan lovers whose all-too-short romance is destroyed by the political fates of the Trojan war, as well as Cressida's weakness of spirit when it comes to remaining loyal to Troilus.

This tale is not well-known and requires a brief explication. Calchas, Cressida's father, has betrayed his Trojan heritage by changing sides and turning Greek. Calchas complains about not being a very happy traitor, though the reader wonders how he could be. Shakespeare provides no explicit or clear reason for his betrayal. When the Greeks capture the valiant Trojan warrior Antenor, Calchas sees an opening to force his daughter Cressida to join his company. Meanwhile Cressida is making passionate love to Troilus;

Shakespeare only allows them one night together before the bottom drops under them. Calchas convinces the Greeks to trade Antenor for Cressida, and so it is done. Diomedes is the Greek who transports the crestfallen Cressida back to the Grecian military camp.

Neither Chaucer nor Shakespeare win admirers among today's feminists for how Cressida is next portrayed. Both authors allow her little time to fall in love with Troilus and thereby consummate her feelings. She requires little more time, perhaps even less time, to become enraptured with Diomedes and become his mistress. Shakespeare's Troilus overhears Cressida's lovemaking with a sudden new partner, and feels understandably crushed in spirit.

Unlike Chaucer, Shakespeare never takes the lovers' sad tale any further. Troilus makes a few heart-rendering speeches—Shakespeare the psychologist at his best—but no further action is taken. Troilus has a brutal war he must return to. Cressida is left with Diomedes. Chaucer continued the lovers' history to a final tragic conclusion, with the death of Troilus. This is the same Troilus who utters the closing lines to Shakespeare's play and shows no immediate signs of dying. We will quote the grieving Troilus later, but first we must answer this question.

Chaucer's poem focuses entirely on the two lovers with the Trojan War serving as an often distant, never silent, seldom too loud, but necessary background—not so with Shakespeare. Shakespeare's play is divided between the tragic lovers and the occult political maneuverings in the Greeks' military camp, made up of numerous tents that might have been in place for the seven years of the war's duration. The mighty walls of Troy have withstood the frequent frontal assaults of the Greeks for an

amazing seven years. No end is in sight. One wonders how both sides have kept themselves fed during all this time. The Trojans feel a slight anxious desperation, while the Greeks feel a monumental desperation.

If Shakespeare had titled his play *Achilles and Ajax*, or *The Wisdom of Ulysses*, he would not have sacrificed much, if anything, in accuracy. Without the many important scenes in the Greek camp, the play could be performed in less than an hour, and without those scenes, the Bard's finest clear and extensive statement of Neo-Platonic hierarchy would not exist. This set of long speeches is given to Ulysses, while Cressida is still safely among her people.

Ulysses' explication is our primary reason for providing an entire chapter on this play. But to discuss any play by Shakespeare, we do need a basic survey of its events, for none of his characters' orations stand alone; Ulysses' grand pungent eloquence is not a solitary exercise in a high school speech tournament, where nothing matters but the actual lines. A long virtuoso speech by Shakespeare can never work this way, though so often taken out of context in anthologies of favorite purple passages. The character is reacting to whatever has come before, his probing interpretation of it, and sometimes how his extended utterance can thrust the play forward into the future. Each Hamlet soliloquy propels the action forward, even if not as swiftly as the Danish Prince or audience would like. Action in the Greek camp will be put on permanent hold. Ulysses' dominant voice occurs in Act One, Scene One. Later occult misgivings and fearful portents will occur inside the Trojan walls, Act Five, Scene Two. We will discuss both these sections in detail. They provide the occult structure for the play, and curiously do not include the two lovers. Yet if our two occult

sections strongly indicate a world or cosmos is tumbling or crumbling apart, the lovers shall never escape this—a dark star will be hovering over them—and they shall join the tragic outcome that overtakes all major participants in the prolonged Trojan War, as all Elizabethan readers of Chaucer, Homer, and Virgil would surely have known.

Shakespeare's Greeks are long-winded. Before Ulysses gets his chance, Agamemnon, the Grecian king and general, laments the seven long years of utter failure to crash through the Trojan walls. Nestor, the elderly wise man, next explicates how sturdy ships can survive treacherous seas while weak ships cannot. Shakespeare is fond of this Neptune metaphor. He has used it several times before. At last the stage is set for Ulysses and his cosmic Neo-Platonic explication. We will quote his speech in sections. He begins with a basic course in astronomy. Please note that astronomy and astrology were interchangeable terms to Shakespeare's audience, and to that audience Ulysses speaks.

ULYSSES

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre
Observe degree, priority, and place,
In fixture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office and custom, in all line of order.
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence entrhroned and sphered
Amidst the other, whose med'cinable eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil
And posts like the commandment of a king,
Sans check, to good and bad.

Troilus and Cressida
Act One, Scene Three
lines 85-94

Ulysses' opening ten lines stress the valued order of the planetary system that all humans live within. The Hermetic theme—as above, so below—is put into place. As the sun rules above, the king rules below. Planets have power to cause illness and heal. This fact could be taken from Ficino's *De Vita*, any section, though Shakespeare could have grasped those concepts in the air around him. It need hardly be repeated that Ficino was the source of those ideas. The sky holds "good and evil" as does our earth below. One can affect the other. Hence the wise person, Ulysses rather than Nestor, Ulysses rather than Hector, must maintain constant Hermetic vigilance of all that occurs, above and below.

This sacred order and predictable skyward cosmic positioning can be shattered, or made abundantly confusing, when the planets wander off their expected track. Wanderer was the Greek word for planet. Mars, the planet of violence and war, was the greatest wanderer of all. Ulysses describes the earthly horrors of what can happen when the Neo-Platonic hierarchy is violated—when planets wander. Do note the constant, living, cosmic attention or tension between all objects above and all objects and life forms below.

ULYSSES

But when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents, what mutiny?
What raging of the sea, shaking of the earth?
Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate

The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixture.

Troilus and Cressida
Act One, Scene Three
lines 94-101

Ulysses has worked up a head of steam, eloquent expression, as if a Renaissance magus was dictating in his ear. If a planet wanders—most likely Mars, but surely possible for any of them—then the sea can rage and the earth can shake. Shaked becomes a key word, near apocalyptic. A modern reader might doubt the immense overwhelming power sent earthward of a planet suddenly wandering, but not Ulysses, nor his audience, for no Greek dares interrupt, and we can thereby assume all those mighty Greek warriors stand quietly, perhaps reverently, listening to whatever brave, wise Ulysses determines to say.

Ulysses has much more to say. He repeats the word “shaked” which causes severe harm if a single invisible degree is altered, degree being in the singular. Ladder is a simple but excellent metaphor to describe the ascent from a troubled earth to a wandering planet. Ulysses lists a series of earthbound catastrophes if degree is slightly altered. A planet does not have to wander far for great damage below to occur. We quote the next fourteen lines of unrelieved small-scale apocalyptic tragedy.

ULYSSES

O when degree is shaked,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick. How could communities,
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenity, and due of birth,

Prerogative of age, crowns, scepters, laurels,
But by degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows. Each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy. The bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores
And make a sop of all this solid globe;
Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead.

Troilus and Cressida

Act One, Scene Three

lines 101-115

Ulysses, a Greek who lived about five centuries before Plato, nevertheless next describes how Plato's ideal abstractions shall be destroyed. A planet crashing into earth might not be more destructive. The powers below, like above, will destroy themselves. The language at last has become truly apocalyptic. The Trojan War cannot continue if the planet earth ceases to be. The wolf is not a mere creature of the wild, but universal. Seven years of living in tents can do this to people, even the bravest of warriors.

ULYSSES

Force should be right—or rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,

So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

Troilus and Cressida

Act One, Scene Three

lines 116-124

Ulysses will talk uninterrupted for sixty-one lines. Rarely does a Shakespeare character talk so long and so well. This underrated speech of Ulysses deserves the precise attention we are giving it, for the poetry maintains a high level and the content describes with a precise no-holds-barred intensity the belief system the Greeks labor under. Ulysses will soon put that system to positive use, but first he must finish his first oration, and he does so by respectfully and appropriately returning his attention to Agamemnon. Yet his final line will prove devastating to all listeners, no doubt crowded close to hear.

ULYSSES

Great Agamemnon,
This chaos, when degree is suffocate,
Follows the choking.
And this neglection of degree it is
That by a pace goes backward in a purpose
It hath to climb. The general's disdained
By him one step below; he, by the next;
That next, by him beneath. So every step,
Exampled by the first pace that is sick
Of his superior, grows to an envious fever
Of pale and bloodless emulation.
And 'tis this fever that keeps Troy on foot,

Not her own sinews. To end a tale of length:
Troy in our weakness lives, not in her strength.

Troilus and Cressida

Act One, Scene Three

lines 124-137

If the Greeks have only themselves to blame for their own weakness in the siege, can Ulysses be more specific—he needs to be powerfully more specific—and provide the remedy? Ulysses, never at a loss for words, reverses the cosmic ladder he has just taken such pains to elaborate. Significant events can move up and down the ladder from different directions. Hence a wandering planet can cause problems below—we have already been talked to death about that—but a human trapped in constant misbehavior can send wicked stirrings up the ladder, jolt a planet out of its path, and cause severe problems below. This is pure Ficino, and we can assume Ulysses, our expert on the ladder theory, would know it. Ulysses assumes his enraptured audience would know it. When asked the earthly remedy, he immediately answers Achilles. Any Elizabethan knowing Homer would have expected this, and likewise for the gathered Greeks. Achilles might be the greatest of Greek warriors, but his sustained excessive pride and arrogance have made him intolerable to be near. Even worse, he will no longer use his great battle skills to fight against the enemy Trojans. The Trojan wall might not be as towering and hard as Achilles' pride.

What does Achilles do all day? Ulysses tells us in his next extended speech. Achilles spends most of each day and night hidden away in his tent with no companion but Patroclus. A homoerotic possibility leaps forward—what else could they be doing alone together all that time? Ulysses' answer avoids

the sexual but he vividly describes how Patroclus does comic imitations—the Rich Little of the ancient world—of the other Greek soldiers, and this delights and amuses Achilles, usually sulking, who now cries out for ribs of steel to hold in his laughter, a laughter quite likely tinged with bitterness, jealousy, hatred. Ulysses has solidly made his point. Achilles has so offended the common norms of decency, severely offended on so many levels, that the planets above cannot be happy. Hence the Greeks can expect nothing but trouble from the far overhead powers-that-be.

Ulysses' long explanation seems to satisfy his comrades in arms. The reason for their failure to break down Troy's walls lies with Achilles and only Achilles. How else to explain the seven long years of trying? Why else would their beloved gods have stood so steadfastly against them? Ulysses pinpoints this connection. When asked the remedy, he at once says Achilles and then elaborates. Achilles' excuse, perhaps not known outside his tent, is he dearly loves a Trojan maiden and therefore cannot fight her countrymen. But this excuse will only take him so far. It does not begin to explain how strongly he encourages Patroclus to poke fun at his comrades, nor can it minimize his self-destructive overpowering pride.

The second extended occult scene in *Troilus and Cressida* occurs in the opening ninety-seven lines of Act Five, Scene Three. Hector, the greatest Trojan warrior, is in conflict with his devoted wife Andromache on the morning preceding battle, which shall be the last day of Hector's life. Like Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar*, Andromache is deeply troubled by terrible dreams of the night past about what tragic fate awaits her husband on the battlefield. Andromache is soon joined by Cassandra, sister of Hector and prophetess of Troy. The Trojans

in Shakespeare's play try offputting Cassandra by repeatedly calling her mad, but they cannot discount the accuracy of her predictions. From Homer, the name Cassandra has become a synonym for correct prophecy, and Elizabethans would have known that. Hector's sad fate is he does not know it well enough.

Hector is armed when Act Five, Scene Three begins. Andromache begs him not to fight, "My dreams will sure prove ominous to the day," line 6. Cassandra enter, "Where is my brother Hector?" line 7. Andromache seeks help from her sister-in-law and makes her full complaint.

ANDROMACHE

Here, sister, armed and bloody in intent.
Consort with me in loud and dear petition,
Pursue we him on knees—for I have dreamed
Of bloody turbulence, and this whole night
Hath nothing been but shapes and forms of slaughter.

Troilus and Cressida

Act Five, Scene Two

lines 8-12

Clearly her dreams hold extraordinary power for her. Cassandra promptly responds, "O 'tis true," line 13. Both women trust a living cosmos of vast interconnected powers. They are subjects of the astrological system that Ulysses has talked about. If the future position of a planet can be accurately predicted—recall Shakespeare was born in 1564, the same year as Galileo, and twenty-one years after the death of Copernicus—and following the future of a planet is far from a difficult task, then that planet's effects on earth below can also be ascertained with a solid prediction that holds far more than educated guesswork. The future can quite adeptly be predicted by planetary

movement. As above, so below. The next statement requires a great leap of Hermetic faith, which Hector cannot let himself make, but the two women strongly adhere to. If planets can be trusted to predict a lethal future, so can dreams. The gods are in charge of both, as Cassandra tells us in response to Hector's swearing vow to enter battle.

CASSANDRA

The gods are deaf to hot and peevish vows.
They are polluted off'rings, more abhorred
Than spotted livers in the sacrifice.

Troilus and Cressida
Act Five, Scene Three
lines 16-18

The debate continues with short eloquent outbursts. Troilus, fully armed, enters and Cassandra leaves with the final warning, "Unarm, sweet Hector," line 25. Slightly crazed she might be, but she truly loves her valiant brother. Next Hector, alarmed by all this occult female chattering, tells his younger brother Troilus to disarm, but to no avail. Troilus responds like John Wayne out to attack the villains.

Meanwhile Cassandra is not finished. She makes a quick sudden return entrance, this time bringing the crestfallen Priam, her father, but more importantly, the father of Hector and Troilus. Priam, somewhat surprisingly, believes in ominous dreams as much as the two women. He adds a third woman, his wife Hecuba, and a second dream. He pleads to be obeyed, and might have clinging moments when he expects to.

PRIAM

Come, Hector, come. Go back.
Thy wife hath dreamt, thy mother hath had visions,

Cassandra doth forsee, and I myself
Am like a prophet suddenly enrapt
To tell thee that this day is ominous.
Therefore come back.

Troilus and Cressida
Act Five, Scene Three
lines 64-69

But his two sons will hear nothing of it. They go forth to battle. Hector, alone, will be murdered by Achilles' gang of unprincipled rowdy thugs, the Myrmidons, no different than a violent street gang in today's urban culture. Troilus will escape with his life, for now, but his young inexperienced heart has been shattered by Cressida's all-too-willing sexual infidelity. Cassandra has little to celebrate, only the exquisite cruelty of her correctness.

Troilus discovers the sexual betrayal of Cressida in Act Five, Scene Two, directly before the scene where nothing can stop his uncaringreckless entrance into battle. After witnessing Cressida with her sudden new lover, Troilus abandons his senses—a modern psychologist might call this cognitive dissonance—and concentrates on his soul, structured within the Neo-Platonic hierarchy. We will not quote all of Troilus' speaking, but capture the gist. First he denies what his eyes and ears are telling him. Next he goes so far as to deny the woman is Cressida. His denial is in acute metaphysical terms, difficult to maintain, and he soon steps back from the teetering edge of madness.

TROILUS

This, she? No, this is Diomed's Cressida.
If beauty have a soul, this is not she.
If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,

If sanctimony be the gods' delight,
If there be rule in unity itself,
This is not she. O madness of discourse,
That cause sets up with and against thyself!
Bifold authority, where reason can revolt
Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
Without revolt! This is and is not Cressid.

Troilus and Cressida

Act Five, Scene Two

lines 140-149

When Troilus stands on firmer ground, he continues. The battle is no longer with his senses but entirely within his soul. His horrid predicament traps his soul between heaven and earth, Ulysses' ladder, a vast distance, then a minuscule distance. He is jolted and knocked about as swiftly as the language can move. He remembers her rare physical qualities, gone to Diomede, but his suffering never strays from the spiritual, a young inexperienced soul—and poet—undergoing its initial profound agony.

TROILUS

Within my soul these doth conduce a fight
Of this strange nature, that a thing inseparate
Divides more wider than the sky and earth,
And yet the spacious breadth of this division
Admits no orifex for a point as subtle
As Ariachne's broken woof to enter.
Instance, O instance, strong as Pluto's gates:
Cressid is mine, tied with the bonds of heaven.
Instance, O instance, strong as heaven itself:
The bonds of heaven are slipped, dissolved, and losed,
And with another knot, five-finger-tied,

The fractions of her faith, orts of her love,
The fragments, scraps, the bits and greasy relics
Of her o'er-eaten faith, are bound to Diomed.

Troilus and Cressida

Act Five, Scene Two

lines 150-163

We will close by mentioning a few of the times alchemical imagery appears in the play. Return briefly to Ulysses' long speech where he combines the sun and medicine. In alchemical terms, the sun was the symbol of gold, the goal of alchemy. The goal could also be greater than gold, called the Philosopher's Stone, a medicinal stone inspired by supernal contact with the sun to cure all illness. If Ulysses had lived in Elizabethan London, he would have known that, just as Hector would have known the brief alchemical allusion in Act One, Scene Three, lines 343-345, "That breath fume flows; that praise, sole pure, / transcends." The alchemist is the puffer and his intention is always to transcend his purpose. This can only be possible in ascending alive, and for that reason we bring in the alchemy, to reinforce Ulysses' living cosmos. We could also find joyously inventive passages of Hermetic imagination in the prose speeches of Thersites, the servant-clown of Ajax, who lacks the others nobility but maintains a strong wit.

Chapter Fifty-four:

King Lear

A long collection of masterful essays might not suffice in illuminating the profound multiple aspects of *King Lear*. A. C. Bradley and Harold Bloom, almost a century part, produced wise incisive character studies, and a critic would require manifold extraordinary insights to achieve better. This chapter learns from them in overall depth, if not in specific detail, and could not get past the first few pages without coming up against Shakespeare's stunning array of lightning-minded, complex characters—in no other play does Shakespeare provide so many fully-drawn characters who talk so incredibly well. Our task is to fit these characters—and the tumultuous cosmic outdoors that surrounds them—into Ficino's World Soul. This requires all God's creation be ever teeming with life, from the farthest reaches of the cosmos closest to God—called Jove or Jupiter in this play with an essentially pagan background drawn from an ancient Albion lost in the foggy mists of time—to the spotted toads and clumps of dirt men walk over.

Shakespeare has never before presented a cosmos so astoundingly alive. It is also Ficino's World Soul, derived like

so much in Ficino from Plato (the *Timaeus*), and the play's nearly numberless living parts must be learned through the characters' brilliant talking, in blank verse, song, or prose. We are in theatre, a theatre of the World Soul. We shall hear no other voices.

Let us look at the cosmos, genuine and Ficinian, as the Elizabethan playgoer might have seen it. Copernicus published his epochal work in 1543, placing the sun in the center of the planetary system. The earth had previously held that central position, heavy with spiritual weight and authority, for fourteen centuries. Copernicus relied on a long series of sublime mathematical deductions, but he did not stray far from the *Hermetica* as first translated by Ficino. Copernicus involved Thrice-Great Hermes in his opening chapters, notably the Egyptian's special worship of the sun. This aspect of Copernicus is left out of textbooks today, but Elizabethans who read Copernicus could not have missed it.

Nor could they have missed the new star that suddenly appeared overhead on November 11, 1572. Countless speculations were made about the meaning of the star—astronomers also debated its location without use of the telescope, still four decades away—but no one could deny the star. You only had to wait till the sun set, tilt your head back, and look. You could keep looking till March 1574 when the star disappeared. An omen? Apocalyptic times? A creative skybound unit God decided he wasn't quite satisfied with? A source of nightmares or soothing calm?

Astrologers had a more specific problem. Every twenty years, Saturn and Jupiter, believed the two outer and largest planets, with or without Copernicus, join together in a different sign of the Zodiac. These signs are called trigons, and divided

into four groups: earth, air, fire, water. This might not be sophisticated science, or science at all, but science had failed to answer convincingly the great star of 1577. Now in March 1583, the two large planets were about to move from the last phase of Pisces, the final sign of the watery trigon, and return to what Hermetists called the primary or fiery trigon. Consider these same Hermetists considered Copernicus' work important because the sun is fiery. Science often moves forward by slow, erratic strides, from the genuine science of Copernicus backtracking to the astrology of March 1583. Both Hermetist and scientist—and back then a person could be both, with Copernicus himself the grand example—took serious note on October 10, 1580 when yet another blazing star appeared in Pisces, only to disappear a month later. Was this another comet, like the one in 1577? Who could say? Hadn't the 1580 space body lasted too long for a comet but not long enough for a star? But what then?

Elizabethans were asking these questions, and many like them, when they entered the theatre to witness the opening of *King Lear* in 1606. Debates exist over the exact year, but that's not our purpose. Our text is the 1623 folio. In Act One, Scene Two, Gloucester and Edmond give opposing prose speeches on the validity of astrology. But that is not quite accurate. Unlike the play, we let Edmond speak first. He denies his natal horoscope had any effects on his nature, a big word in this play, "I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing." Edmond wants a full man's responsibility for whatever he does. His opening speech is over fifty words long, never venturing from the astrological, and begins, "Tis the excellent foppery of the world." Line 16.

Gloucester's previous speech, perhaps his wisest utterance in the play, deals with cosmic forces and their effects on earth, but he far surpasses natal astrology in the wide-ranging depth of his belief system. He deals with an erratic sky the Elizabethans were used to. Gloucester gives utterance to the Renaissance microcosm-macrocosm theory, as often found in Ficino. Man is the microcosm and his experiences on earth can be controlled, effected, or powerfully influenced by the heavenly realm. Gloucester means exactly this with his opening statement, "These late excises in the sun and moon portend no good to us." He next introduces that all-important term nature, bringing the cosmic divine ever downward. "Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent events." Line 104.

Gloucester's nature is whatever pertains to man, and he develops this concept by a merciless catalogue of human calamities. "The King falls from the bias of nature: there's father against child." Gloucester next states what could be the play's thesis, "We have seen the best of our time." He gives examples; "Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorder follow us disquietly to our graves." Line 112.

Gloucester is not a fool in dealing with portents, but only with his sons. He would not blame the play's endless series of tragic suffering to a few "late eclipses." But the cosmic sky has been set. Disorder above (macrocosm) imitates or reinforces the horrid political-familial order below (microcosm), as both Lear and Gloucester lose all vital connection with their offspring. In Act One, Scene One, when Lear foolishly rejects Cordelia, he still manages to speak well, and uses powerful cosmic terms.

LEAR

Let it be so. Thy truth then be thy dower;
For by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate and the night,
By all the operation of the orbs
For whom we do exist and cease to be,
Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity, and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee from this forever. The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighboured, pitied, and relieved
As thou, my sometime daughter.

King Lear

Act One, Scene One

lines 108-120

Kent's plaintive, pleading common sense cannot take back the forbidding power of those lines. In Ficino's World Soul, Cordelia has been cast aside from all the goodness and love the Soul can handle; she needs an equally powerful speech to retain her station, and sadly, only her father has those qualities. She will remain an outcast till his ever resourceful powers of speech have drained nearly to their ebb.

Kent remains loyal to the king, and provides a noble opposite to the scurrilous Oswald, Goneril's servant. In Act Two, Scene One, Kent overwhelms Oswald—winning a battle of words, for this play often is such a battle—in a barrage of prose insults:

KENT

A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-talking, whoreson, glass-gazing super-serviceable, finical rogue; one-truck-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in a way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch, one whom I will beat into clamorous whining if thou deniest the least syllable of thy addition.

King Lear

Act Two, Scene One

lines 13-22

Lear has sadly reached high on the Neo-Platonic ladder to insult Cordelia; Kent has been equally insulting from the ladder's bottom rungs. Shakespeare takes so many different kinds of risks when these characters start talking; he moves almost recklessly up and down the Neo-Platonic ladder; he doesn't encounter a hurdle he won't attempt leaping over. Hence all manner of language is possible, with all shades of meaning to be carefully worked out. Characters constantly go on attack with each other; but for the play's first four acts they do so with words. They only turn to physical violence when not even these aggressively-verbal characters can be hateful and cruel enough.

Edmond's opening speech is so different from those already quoted. Act One, Scene Two, lines 1-22. He begins, "Thou, nature, art my goddess." That poses a difficult line to explain—yet one more reference to nature—and Edmond does so while it's still possible to like him. His much-deserved place in the World Soul is diminished, spat on, several notches down the ladder (though a Hercules compared to Oswald), all because his birth did not result from a legitimate marriage. For this one time, Edmond is not at fault and we can share his anger and well-deserved pride in his appearance and accomplishments. Edmond's vengeful solution, not yet stated, is to destroy his father and legitimate brother—hence destroy the ladder by any means possible. Ficino's world can have no soul because Edmond soon proves to have no soul. He never experiences love because he's profoundly incapable of giving it. But he can talk. He talks both his father and Lear's two daughters into ruin, not that the latter didn't have a solid start on their own. Edmond will go on to deny the World Soul by refusing to consider its existence. He remains the one character in the play without a true friend.

Shakespeare tells us nothing about Lear before the play opens. We know nothing of his queen, the length and accomplishments (if any) of his reign, and exactly how he related to his daughters before Act One. Cordelia would appear his favorite, and yet why reject her so suddenly. What we do know about Lear is, elderly he might be, but his mind can stop and turn with lightning speed, during a long speech or a few short lines. Consider Lear's reaction to Goneril, when she fails to meet his all-imposing needs. Lear threatens to leave Goneril, foolishly assuming Regan will treat him better. The old man cries out (Act One, Scene Four, lines 237-239): "Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend, / more hideous when thou show'st

thee in a child / Than the sea-monster—" These lines are not likely to bring a softening of heart in Goneril. Lear has again cast a daughter from her rightful place in the World Soul. But it shall get worse, much worse. Albany, the marshmallow husband of Goneril, makes the lame remark, "Pray sir, be patient." Line 240

Then Lear explodes to Goneril, defending his 100 unruly knights, and just as suddenly shows his first inclination, a minor epiphany, that he has treated Cordelia wrongly.

LEAR (to Goneril)

Detested kite, thou liest.
My train are men of choice and rarest parts,
That all particulars of duty know,
And in the most exact regard support
The worships of their name. O most small fault,
How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show,
Which, like an engine, wrenched my frame of nature
From the fixed place, drew from my heart all love,
And added to the gall! O Lear, Lear, Lear!
Bear at this gate that let thy folly in
And thy dear judgement out.—Go, go, my people.

King Lear
Act One, Scene Four
lines 241-251

Albany again makes a weak attempt to calm the old king, who responds by a virtuoso display of cursing, a horrid catalogue of cursing upon one's daughter, no matter how cruel and insensitive she might have been. Lear almost enjoys his relentless fury of expression, as though getting warmed up for later sections of the play.

LEAR

It may be so, my lord.
Hear, nature; hear, dear goddess, hear:
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility.
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her. If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen, that it may live
And be a thwarted disnatured torment to her.
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,
Torn all her mother's pain and benefits
To laughter and contempt, that she may feel —
That she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child. Away, away!

King Lear

Act One, Scene Four

lines 253-269

Lear is still not finished with Goneril. It never occurs to him that Goneril and Regan could be in league against him. He never considers all his outrageous talking—outrageously poetic—will firm that league past breaking. Lear does not like to eat, drink, love, hunt, or play cards. He loves to talk, and so he talks. The reader is reminded of King Richard II in his failing moments, but Lear is far the greater talker, perhaps the best Shakespeare produced for functioning at so many levels of the World Soul. Lear's final words to Goneril, who might've thought she couldn't have been cursed any lower, show the

themes of Lear's desperate need to hold onto his manhood, thereby not being subdued by his daughter, and avoid the womanish shedding of tears.

LEAR

I'll tell thee. (to Goneril) Life and death! I am ashamed
That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,
That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,
Should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs upon
thee!

The 'untended woundings of a father's curse
Pierce every sense about thee! Old fond eyes,
Beweep this cause again I'll pluck ye out
And cast you, with the waters that you loose,
To temper clay. Ha! Let it be so.

I have another daughter
Who, I am sure, is kind and comfortable.
When she shall hear this of thee, with her nails
She'll slay thy wolvish visage. Thou shalt find
That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think
I have cast off for ever.

King Lear
ActOne, Scene Four
lines 276-289

Perhaps this outpouring of words entertained Lear and gave him comfort. It's a certainty no other figure on the stage shared these views.

What Shakespeare accomplishes in the play is attempting and most often mastering each type of language that could be found within Ficino's World Soul. Characters are given personal vocabularies—and a character can be given more than one—that reach from the height to the depth of

cosmic creation, with a seemingly endless series of steps in-between. No character, is a magus, in the sense of Prospero or Faustus, but many characters have extraordinary resources of language, and this allows them the magus-like quality to make connections, connections that are often original, compelling, and frightening—Lear's three substained rages against Goneril show a dark magus at work. Lear isn't talking just to let off steam; he truly feels bitten by a serpent's tooth—what better satanic metaphor to apply to his daughter—and he truly desires the sustained revenge Goneril will suffer from her own wicked offspring. The concept of Christian forgiveness does not exist in the play's first four acts. Lear wants revenge. He seeks dark, fearful combinations of words to bring that revenge about, both against the innocent Cordelia and to a far greater extent against cold-hearted Goneril. This play is lacking in characters with warm hearts. The hearts burning with proper love come too late, at the play's close, when language of white magic makes all too brief an appearance.

Another example of Shakespeare's awesome craft in developing a new language for a specific character occurs when Edgar stands alone on stage, disguised as Tom 'o Bedlam, and gives the following soliloquy.

EDGAR

I heard myself proclaimed,
And by the happy hollow of a tree
Escaped the hunt. No port is free, no place
That guard and most unusual vigilance
Does not attend my taking. Whiles I may scape
I will preserve myself, and am bethought
To take the basest and most poorest shape
That ever penury in contempt of man

Brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth,
Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots,
And with presented nakedness one face
The winds and persecutions of the sky.
The country gives me proof and precedent
Of Bedlam beggars who with roaring voices
Strike in their numbed and mortified arms
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary,
And with this horrible object from low farms,
Pour pelting villages, sheep-cotes and mills
Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers
Enforce their charity. 'Poor Tuely god Tom, Poor Tom.'
That's something yet. Edgar I nothing am.

King Lear

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 164-184

Edgar is the legitimate son of Gloucester, thereby born royalty, high up on the Neo-Platonic scale. To disguise himself, and thereby save his life, he appears at the lowest rung of the ladder. The microcosm-macrocosm is brilliantly at play, "And with presented nakedness out face / The winds and persecutions of the sky." This phrase is another portent of the great storm that is coming. If the macrocosm accurately follows earthly events, that storm was building up from the moment Lear rejected Cordelia in cosmic terms (Act One, Scene One, lines 108-120).

Lear comes face to face with his two uncaring, cruel daughters in Act One, Scene Two. If he could shut down his remarkable gifts for language, a workable solution, though humiliating for a time, could possibly be worked out. But Lear prefers to hold the stage like an Old Testament God. He required fifty men to wait on him each day. Did Solomon have

that many? If so, for what possible purpose? A soldier for each eyelash? Lear again has the brief lightening-like epiphany that he's mistreated Cordelia, and yet he seems most intent, amid his great barrages of language, of mistreating himself.

LEAR

Return to her, and fifty men dismissed?
No, rather I abjure all roofs, and choose
To be a comrade with the wolf and owl,
To wage against the enmity o' th' air
Necessity's sharp pinch. Return with her?
Why, the hot-blooded France, that dowerless took
Our youngest born—I could as well be brought
To knee his throne and squire-like, pension beg
To keep base life afoot. Return with her?
Persuade me rather to be slave and sumpter
To this detested groom.

King Lear

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 380-389

He will soon be a comrade with the “wolf and owl,” but he will lack their resources of surviving. Talking at a great hurried rate simply will not keep the impending storm away.

Goneril responds coldly, “At your choice, sir,”

From Lear’s position, she couldn’t have given a worse answer. His eldest daughter, like in a cosmic familial card game, has called his bluff. He is about to be bounced back and forth like a helpless tennis ball between his two daughters, until Regan makes the ultimate remark about the King and his royal masculine need for soldiers, “Why need one?” (Act Two, Scene Two, line 438).

But Lear still has to respond to Goneril's coldness, and this results in his most cosmic passage so far.

LEAR

I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad.
I will not trouble thee, my child. Farewell.
We'll no more meet, no more see one another.
But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter —
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil
A plague-sore or embossed carbuncle
In my corrupted blood. But I'll not chide thee.
Let shame come when it will, I do not call it.
I do not bid the thunder-bearer shoot,
Nor tell tales of thee to high-judging Jove.
Mend when thou canst; be better at thy leisure.
I can be patient, I can stay with Regan,
I and my hundred knights.

King Lear
Act Two, Scene Two
lines 391-403

Regan's blow ("Why need one?") wouldn't have hit so brutally hard had Lear not made this foolishly no-holds-barred speech. He has trapped himself in a corner in a house that has no corners. Could it be his daughters keep him talking because they perversely enjoy listening? Because he can make grand speeches till hell freezes over and not change his own sad, hapless, isolated situation? He either shuts his mouth or goes outdoors, and he chooses the latter.

LEAR

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady.
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou, gorgeous, wear' st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But for true need —
You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need.
You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age, wretched in both,
If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely. Touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man's cheeks. No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall—I will do such things—
What they are, yet I know not; but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep.
No. I'll not weep. I have full cause of weeping,
(storm and tempest)
But this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Ore ere I'll weep—O Fool, I shall go mad!

King Lear
Act Two, Scene Two
lines 439-459

Lear is again struggling to maintain his masculinity and refrain from womanish tears. He refers to nature, as do so many characters: "Allow not nature more than nature needs." Lear will soon show he has no idea of nature's powers or how to

resist them. Outdoor sounds of the storm and tempest can already be heard. His daughters are of course "unnatural hags." That was to be expected. But what makes this one speech so sad and poignant is Lear's loud vows of revenge. He cannot be at all specific about his plans, "the terrors of the earth," because no such plans are possible. He is a tired old man with only a Fool to lean on. "That all the world shall know"—Lear never makes a more empty boast, and he must sense it, for he immediately is again fighting off tears and then his far greater enemy: madness. This speech shows the outbursting of an intellect, not all that wise or strong to start with, but powerfully eloquent with a remarkable agility—a great test for any actor—to jump from mood to mood.

Lear has chosen the outdoors. The First Gentleman, a curiously useful and unnamed character, remarks on how Lear is doing out there.

KENT

Who's there, besides foul weather?

FIRST GENTLEMAN

One minded like the weather,
Most quietly.

KENT

I know you. Where's the King?

FIRST GENTLEMAN

Contending with the fretful elements;
Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea
Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
That things might change or cease.

KENT

But who is with him?

FIRST GENTLEMAN

None but the Fool, who labours to outjest
His heart-struck injuries.

King Lear

Act Three, Scene One
lines 1-8

These lines might show more pathetic sadness than anything the diminished king says about himself. Lear has raged curses against his two wicked daughters and gotten no results, at least not immediately, and when Lear gives commands, on sky or earth, macrocosm or microcosm, he wants them carried out fast. If he cannot effectively command his daughters, he climbs up Ficino's ladder to order the skies. This of course will not work either, not even slightly. Lear never considers prayer, nor the humility that prayer requires, and so all that's left for him is to venture out in the storm, the most famous and violent storm in English literature.

No matter how effective the special stage effects used to create havoc and terror from the skies, the audience experiences the storm from Lear's language, accompanied by Kent, to give validity to the almost supernal destruction the sky is raging. The storm's furious opening blows is contained throughout all of Scene Two of Act Three. This is much too long to quote in full, and yet each speech, each section requires close scrutiny. For Lear to suffer so, Goneril and Regan truly have serpent's teeth, and their husbands are weak, henpecked, cowardly beyond measure. Kent (in disguise) and the Fool (no stage directions about his costume) remain loyally close beside Lear, no matter

how long or loud the storm rages, with the storm primarily revealed in Lear's eloquent, anguished voice.

The crux of the play takes place in these divided loyalties—the supporters of the tragic old king are forever assured whom to like and dislike. It will be no surprise when Edgar (Tom o' Bedlam) and Cordelia join his side, but by then this storm to end all storms is over. Lear has endured, but only so he can go on enduring. The storm is the dramatic focal point—once he steps outside, he will never again be able to play a winning hand.

Lear turns the storm into a living force, with a personality, monstrous, but perhaps able to hear him as the great second scene begins, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks / Rage, blow." Lear is almost daring the storm to be more raging than he is. He has at once brought the microcosm-macrocosm into play. He will fully develop this idea in a later speech. Now he gives life to the storm, "thought-executing fires, / Vaunt-couriers of oak-clearing, thunderbolts, / Singe my white head." The ever increasing powers above are ordered to "singe" the ever decreasing power below. Lear next demands—he cannot request, he must always demand—the World Soul tear apart in its lower reaches, below the moon. If Lear must suffer, so should the "thick rotundity o' th' world." Line 7. Nature's moulds—again nature—are to be cracked. If Lear had read Plato, most unlikely, he would be seeking to destroy the eternal Forms or Ideas, made such common knowledge throughout the Renaissance by Ficino. But subtle philosophy aside, Lear means to destroy whatever he cannot control, even if he must be destroyed in the process. If the planet is cracked out of existence, Goneril and Regan won't be able to live in it either.

The Fool could not select a better time to intervene. We assume the Fool is a masculine part, though we have no background information on him. The Fool talks about “holy water in a dry house,” Line 10, a metaphor better than what Lear describes. He even considers the Goneril-Regan card could be played again. Why so hopeful? Because like the audience, the Fool is familiar with the king’s verbal explosions. This time Lear’s outburst, though exaggerated, has a basis in fact. But the Fool has been around too long to be shattered by one furious, haunting outburst. Like a good Fool, he maintains his role of speaking plain simple truth, still a possibility in a World Soul that refuses to heed Lear’s commands and be destroyed. “Here’s a night pities neither wise men nor fools.” Lines 12-13.

No evidence exists, nor possibly could exist, that Shakespeare read the hymn in *Corpus Hermetica XIII*, but the hymn’s magus author shows a pious control over natural forces denied to Lear. We use Brian P. Copenhaver’s translation of *Hermetica*, Cambridge U. Press, 1992, page 53. We quote from the Hermetic magus:

Let every nature in the cosmos attend the hearing
of the hymn. Open O earth; let every lock that
bars the torrent open to me; trees, be not shaken.
I am about to sing a hymn to the lord of creation,
to the universe and to the one. Open, you
heavens, and be still, you winds ... a hymn to the
one who created everything; who fixed the earth
in place; who hung the heaven above; who
ordered the sweet water away from the ocean
and toward land, the habitable and the
uninhabitable, as the means of mankind’s

nourishment and creation; who ordered fire to shine on gods and humans for their every use.

The Hermetic hymn is in stark contrast to Lear's next wild utterance, lines 14-24. He is helpless. The horrid rain pelts him, but not as hard as the cutting-edge wounds of his daughters. "Here I stand your slave." The two forces, microcosm (daughters) and macrocosm (storm), join to trap him beyond assistance, almost beyond mercy—"you servile ministers, / That will with two pernicious daughters join." The King is both above and below the World Soul, though totally lost inside it.

How accurate are Lear's ravings? Kent (in disguise) now makes an important entrance in his ceaseless effort to serve his old master. Lear must have some qualities outside the play that inspire such devotion. The heavens break loose and the Fool stands by, spouting a wise cryptical gibberish. The banished Kent returns, and his speech, lines 41 to 48, convince the audience Lear is not mouthing nonsense about the mighty storm. Kent is no youngster, but he proclaims:

KENT

Alas, sir, are you here? Things that love night
Love not such nights as these. The wrathful skies
Gather the very wanderers of the dark
And make them keep their caves. Since I was man
Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,
Such groans of roaring wind and rain I never
Remember to have heard. Man's nature cannot carry
The 'affliction nor the fear.

King Lear
Act Three, Scene Two
lines 42-49

Kent speaks not for himself, but for all men trapped inside the World Soul's relentless deluge.

Lear follows with a herky-jerky speech of Biblical dimensions—the storm holds supernal powers to seek out the unjust and inflict punishment, lines 49-59. The King is angry and he dares the gods to show more anger. If that supernal rage settled hotly on his daughters, he would not mind. He concludes with a rare, sudden, bare, bold statement of self-insight, “I am a man more sinned against than sinning.” The audience could be reminded of Othello’s similar statement: I have loved not too wisely, but too well. The great storm scene ends with the Fool chanting a long, allusive prophecy in couplets—he has lived before Merlin; hence Lear has lived before Arthur, and the earliest days of kingship might not have been Albion’s best.

Lear survives the storm he describes, and falls asleep amid the barest shelter. He has been joined by Edgar, another fine poet of brutal outdoor scenes. But as a versifier, Lear will meet his match only with that melancholy Prince of Denmark or Richard III on his sneak attacks or Falstaff when his best tavern audience surrounds him. Edgar speaks the second most lines to Lear, and he can capture in prose the lowest human step of the ladder: “when the foul fiend rages, eats cow dung for salads, swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog, drinks the green mantle of the standing pool,” Act Three, Scene Four, lines 123-125. The audience can be assured Goneril and Regan are dining better, adding to the disgrace of their disloyalty, if not to a perfect father, then to a living poet whose likes they shall never see again.

Gloucester will endure far greater horrors than the king, for Gloucester suffers one of Shakespeare’s most grotesque acts when Cornwall, husband of Regan, stamps out both his eyes,

with a cruel slow time between each stamping, and then sets Gloucester to “smell his way to Dover,” Act Three, Scene Seven, line 91. Cornwall has been wounded and asks Regan to “give me your arm.” Act Three now ends with the audience wondering what more horrors could this play—or the World Soul that contains it—possibly hold.

The play becomes Gloucester’s after the blinding. Guided by his good son Edgar, still disguised—though how would his father know—the old man insists on being led to the white cliffs of Dover. In a passage admired by Keats, Edgar describes the cliff edge, while standing safely with his father in the heath. Gloucester attempts suicide—the first character in the play to do so—and falls harmlessly on the grass (Act Four, Scene Five, lines 11-24). Edgar now again changes characters, and describes the fiendish supernal creature who led his blind father to the cliff edge. Edgar has added two new voices to his grotesque description of eating disgusting food. He brings several living creatures into the play’s cosmos when he provides a detailed overview of the cliff edge. The sound of his gifted verse can actually imitate the content, “The morning surge / That on th’ unnumbered idle pebble chafes.” Gloucester is told he can only hear this surge through his son’s words. He is immediately convinced, and despairing ever seeing his good son again, he soon makes his sad futile jump. Gloucester has become pathetic, as Lear shall when he suddenly exits running from the First Gentleman (Act Four, Scene Five, lines 198-199). The Gentleman states this sight is “past speaking in a king.” A similar comment could describe the blind, lost old man’s failed suicide.

But Edgar will again approach his father, this time with his third poetic voice, as he describes (falsely) what he saw on the cliff's edge.

EDGAR

As I stood here below, methought his eyes
Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses,
Horns welked and waved like the enraged sea.
It was some fiend. Therefore, thou happy father,
Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours
Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.

King Lear

Act Four, Scene Five

lines 69-74

Edgar has created a supernal vision within the World Soul. He never stops peopling the population and substance of that Soul with the vivid greatness of his imagination. If the play seems at times overlong, this is endured because the characters talk so remarkably well.

Harold Bloom, renowned Shakespeare scholar, finds the Bard at his best in Act Four, Scene Five, when the two old men, who have suffered so horribly, encounter each other. Lear appears crowned with weeds and flowers, a cruel mockery of the title he once held. He proclaims, "Nature's above art in that respect." This line shall always hold true when nature, in its myriad shapes and forms, is controlled by Shakespeare. This might be what Bloom is telling us in his steadfast admiration of this scene. (Harold Bloom Shakespeare, *The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books. 1998. pgs. 476-515.) Lear still connects the storm with his two miserable daughters, macrocosm with microcosm. Gloucester can still hear, and recognizes the king's voice. Lear persists in his cruel

comparison, finally entering mythology; his daughters and thereby all women—has he totally forgotten Cordelia?—are centaurs, women above and thereby belonging to the virtuous gods, but beneath all belongs to fiends, with an onrush of hellish imagery, “There’s hell, there’s darkness, / There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, / consumption.” (lines 124-126.) The unbearably tortured talk continues between the two aged men, and the audience would again be heavily wearied if these oldsters did not talk so well. They have found language for the inexpressible. Maybe for this Bloom greatly admires them. Only Lear’s running flight, as mentioned, can halt this overwrought language.

In Act Four, Scene Six, the stage returns to Cordelia, now Queen of France. Nothing is told about her queenship; if Lear ever became a grandfather, no one in this play knows, as so many basic human facts are barren. Cordelia’s entrance is followed by a deep expression of Kent’s gratitude for staying with her sleeping father through impossible difficulties. The question is never asked why Cordelia’s husband, the monarch of France, never did the same. Cordelia first sees her father asleep, carried in a chair by servants. He has fallen far, but from now on her love will do whatever it can to uplift him. He can never be restored to power; the play is never clear what manifestations of power he once actually possessed; we cannot know exactly how far he has fallen because Shakespeare never tells us how high he once stood. Cordelia of course knows, but she isn’t telling, but her determined fervent goal is for her dutiful daughter’s love to raise his spirits as high as possible. She is careful not to wake him; she understands her sisters’ wicked treatment of the old man: “mine enemy’s dog, though he had bit me, / Should have stood that night against my fire.” She couldn’t state better the dehumanizing process her sisters have

taken out on Lear. However high he once stood on the Neo-Platonic ladder, his defiant walk in the storm has placed him on the lowest rung.

When Lear finally wakes, he's not quite certain where he is or who's watching him. Yet his poetic gifts endure.

LEAR

Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?
I am mightily abused. I should ev'n die with pity
To see another thus. I know not what to say.
I will not swear these are my hands. Let's see:
I feel this pin prick. Would I were assured
Of my condition.

King Lear

Act Four, Scene Six

lines 45-49

Cordelia kneels before her father. The two characters who hold the highest love for each other are at long last together. Lear's next speech shows his full certain recognition of Cordelia. All is forgiven. Lear is not quite in his right mind—he never shall be so again—but Beatrice has come down from heaven to him and for a very short while, all shall be well.

In an extended scene that could be taken from a Walter Scott novel, Edgar (still disguised) defeats Edmond in combat. Cornwall dies, a character without personality. The two wicked sisters, not surprisingly, destroy each other, since nothing else exists within the vast World Soul for them to hurt or damage.

The play urges to return to Lear and Cordelia, the one solid love interest that has overcome all boundaries. Lear never speaks like a Platonist—but his loving thoughts of his one virtuous daughter do lead to spiritual thinking; Diotima, at the

close of *The Symposium*, would be pleased. The French King is swiftly defeated in battle; the only skill he might hold is picking out a good wife, for he fails miserably at any possible help he could have provided his wife and her father. He's one of those Shakespeare characters we know so little about; we make deductions about what we don't know—he couldn't lead a band of soldiers against a handful of possums.

In a prison cell, Lear and Cordelia are brought together one final time. Lear's last great speech expresses, most hopefully, how he plans to spend this time. Echoes of the incarcerated Richard II can be heard.

LEAR

No, no, no, no. Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness; so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old days, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too —
Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out,
And take upon's the mystery of things
As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out
In a walled prison packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th' moon.

King Lear
Act Five, Scene Two
lines 8-19

When Lear mentions "as if we were God's spies," he is making Diotima happy, though he never had the intellect for deep abstract philosophy. He acknowledges how astrologers count time, "that ebb and flow by th' moon." This line brings us back

to Gloucester's warning about eclipses of sun and moon, far earlier in the play.

A modest happy ending in the cell might have been possible if so much wreckless evil did not exist outside it. The final scenes of the play are like an obituary column, sudden death heaved on sudden death. Dr. Samuel Johnson felt deeply troubled about Cordelia's death. The good doctor might have felt worse than her husband. But the World Soul endures. Not even the array of evil characters this play offers can topple it or move it an inch. Dr. Johnson might have felt better if he read Ficino. He apparently read everything else. But Ficino's era was by then over, though not Shakespeare's, not ever that. The Bard concludes his play the only way possible—put the only decent honorable person on the throne, the play's second best poet, the indomitable Edgar.

Chapter Fifty-five:

Two Roman History Plays—Julius Caesar and Coriolanus

Two Political Plays

Shakespeare shows how the Neo-Platonic hierarchy can be violated in two political plays set in ancient Rome—*Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. *Caesar* is often the first Shakespeare play encountered by students in their early years of high school, while *Coriolanus* must usually wait to be studied by advanced students of English literature in the upper echelons of higher education. *Coriolanus* is not that more difficult a play, though longer. A student who can read one can surely read the other. Both plays show how a mob can easily be swayed by skilled or brilliant manipulation and oratory. Both plays have a character named Brutus, though we shall mainly discuss the Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, a major pivotal character. Perhaps *Julius Caesar* depicts characters violating the essential hierarchy of political values in ways, often blood-soaked, that high school readers—and all readers—can find admirable, while the long-winded excesses of *Coriolanus* and his dominating mother Volumnia can be tiresome and repetitious for young readers, though an apt

opportunity for their teacher to introduce basic theories of Freud. Hamlet and Gertrude have often undergone the keen knife of Freud's Oedipal analysis. We suggest Coriolanus and Volumnia would be the better pair.

This essay is about the impact of Ficino, not Freud. Besides the translations of Neo-Platonic hierarchies, Ficino's work also emphasized the microcosm-macrocosm belief system so dear to Renaissance thinking, which is most notably found in the great Hermetic truth: as above, so below. This simple yet profound statement, so dominant throughout the Renaissance, might not have lifted off the ground without Ficino's translation and commentary of the *Hermetica*. Our Hermetic truth is not included in that translation, but in the famed, yes legendary Emerald Tablet of Thrice-Great Hermes, supposedly found at his tomb; this finding remains legend since no burial site of the wise Egyptian is ever noted, but neither legend nor powerful aphorism would have so powerfully caught hold without Ficino's translation in support.

What results in *Julius Caesar* is numerous brilliant passages that provide omens and portents of Caesar's assassination. Though these passages are of course spoken by various characters, the voice is Shakespeare, and he never composed poetry better suited to his purpose. Before Caesar dies, the stage is on fire with a weird, eerie, cosmos-at-risk effect that can never be paraphrased—who can possibly paraphrase Shakespeare?—but which has the audience feeling a cold-hot, biting terror of grievous events to come. Shakespeare masterly allows these passages to build, one on top the other. Only Edgar Allan Poe could create such horror in language. Poe is another favorite of young readers, and this might help to

explain the extraordinary success of *Julius Caesar* in secondary schools.

The main conspirator Cassius speaks a famous line, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but ourselves,” Act One, Scene Two, lines 141-142. This quote stands against the supernal forces discussed in the last paragraph and soon to be quoted. What matters is it stands alone, or rather Cassius stands alone in not suffering overpowering fear at the ominous night ahead, when the dead rise from their graves, a lion walks calmly through the streets of Rome while the earth itself shakes, and warriors fight horrid battles up amid the clouds. Cassius will assume these heavenly portents mean Caesar’s ambition must be stopped. He debates Casca, the poet laureate of the night’s horrors. We cannot quote all this magnificent language, among the finest ever written—the first act of *Julius Caesar* is worth reading many times, especially for a reader who enjoys Poe and likes feeling the hair on the back of his head stand on end. Let Casca describe the terrors of the night, the last night great Caesar shall live.

CASCA

But never till tonight, never till now,
Did I go through a tempest dropping fire.
Either there is a civil strife in heaven,
Or else the world, too saucy with the gods,
Incenses them to send destruction.

Julius Caesar

Act One, Scene Two

lines 9-13

Casca makes the immediate Hermetic connection: as above, so below. He speaks to Cicero, the wise silver-haired orator in the Senate, where Caesar is supposed to be crowned next day.

Cicero, a major figure in Roman history and literature, has a limited part in this play, but he does respond to Casca with a brief pointed question, "Why, saw you anything more wonderful?"

Indeed Casca has seen many things more wonderful, and his blank verse allows him to keep control of his heated emotion as he informs Cicero, truly a cool customer in all this.

CASCA

A common slave—you know him well by sight —
Held up his left hand, which did flame and burn
Like twenty torches joined; and yet his hand,
Not sensible of fire, remained unscorched.
Besides—I ha' not since put up my sword —
Against the capitol I met a lion
Who glazed upon me, and went surly by
Without annoying me. And there were drawn
Upon a heap a hundred ghastly women,
Transforme'd with their fear, who swore they saw
Men all in fire walk up and down the streets.
And yesterday the bird of night did sit
Even at noonday upon the market-place,
Hooting and shrieking. When these prodigies
Do so conjointly meet, let not men say
'These are the reason', 'they are natural',
For I believe they are portentous things
Unto the climate that they point upon.

Julius Caesar

Act One, Scene Two

lines 15-32

Cicero is not to be convinced, though he might be the only person in Shakespeare's theatre to hold stubborn. He answers Casca:

CICERO

Indeed it is a strange-dispose'd time;
But men may construe things after their fashion,
Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.

Julius Caesar

Act One, Scene Three

lines 33-35

Cicero's final line is totally practical, even mundane. Of course the line holds a powerful irony, for Caesar dies in the capitol tomorrow. It is odd this possible idea never occurs to Cicero, who left his mark on history as a politician who usually knew the backstage happenings that could affect the realm.

Casca is far from finished talking, and more wondrous poetry will result. Casca tells his new listener Cassius, our anti-astrology figure, "Who ever knew the heavens menace so?" Act One, Scene Three, line 44. But Cassius, who does not fear lining up assassins against the greatest figure in the Roman world, is not likely to be concerned by an overhead Hermetic sky. Instead he will grab onto the awesome portents as recommendations the gods approve his mission to prevent great Caesar from transforming into a god.

Let us give Cassius room to speak.

CASSIUS

You are dull, Casca, and those sparks of life
That should be in a Roman you do want,
Or else you use not. You look pale, and gaze,
And put on fear, and cast yourself in wonder,

To see the strange impatience of the heavens;
But if would consider the true cause
Why all these fires, why all these gliding ghosts,
Why birds and beasts from quality and kind —
Why old men, fools, and children calculate —
Why all these things change from their ordinance,
Their natures, and performed faculties,
To monstrous quality—why, you shall find
That heaven hath infused them with these spirits
To make them instruments of fear and warning
Unto some monstrous state. Now could I, Casca,
Name to thee a man most like this dreadful night,
That thunders, lightens, opens graves, and roars
As doth the lion in the Capitol;
A man no mightier than myself or me
In personal action, yet prodigious grown,
And fearful, as these strange eruptions are.

Julius Caesar

Act One, Scene Three

lines 57-77

Casca, listening intently, understands the reference and promptly replies, ““Tis Caesar that you mean, is it not, Cassius?”” Cassius suddenly becomes evasive, but only momentarily, “Let it be who it is.””

It is worth noting that Casca, so taken up with the skies, is the play’s only character to show specific astronomical knowledge. Astronomy and astrology often meant the same thing in Elizabethan times. Casca’s knowledge is brief, but noteworthy.

CASCA

Here, as I point my sword, the sun arises,
Which is a great way growing on the south,
Weighing the youthful season of the year.
Some two months hence up higher toward the north
He first presents his fire, and the high east
Stands, as the Capitol, directly here.

Julius Caesar

Act Two, Scene One

lines 105-110

This might remove the superstitious quality from Casca. After all, he has witnessed a weird abundance of unprecedented portents.

Caesar, however, on the last day of his life, has grown superstitious, or at least Cassius finds him so. This might prevent Caesar from leaving his home and thereby becoming vulnerable to assassins. Cassius, with little sympathy for superstition, deeply senses the problem.

CASSIUS

But it is doubtful yet
Whether Caesar will come forth today or no;
Quite from the main opinion he held once
Of fantasy, of dreams and ceremonies.
It may be these apparent prodigies,
The unaccustomed terror of this night,
And the permission of his augurers,
May hold him from the Capitol today.

Julius Caesar

Act Two, Scene One

lines 193-201

Cassius must also soon deal with the vivid ominous dreams of Calpurnia, Caesar's loving wife. She has also listened to witnesses of the horrid night sky, as she tells her husband in a 14-line speech, often repeating materials of Casca—Act Two, Scene One, lines 13-26.

Caesar attempts to downplay her fears, but Calpurnia is both royalist and Hermetic, "When beggars die there are no comets seen; / The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes." Her augurers pluck the insides of an unnamed animal and find no heart within; this truly is lower-class superstition, not Hermetic, but Calpurnia fears all the more. Last night she slept—one of the few characters in the play to do so—and dreamed a statue of her husband with a hundred spouts that "run pure blood." Caesar reveals this dream to the conspirator Decius, come to lead him to the Senate and death. Act One, Scene Two, lines 71-83. Decius forcefully comes up with a positive interpretation of the dream—"from you great Rome shall suck reviving blood." Decius further tells Caesar that he is to be crowned in the Senate that day, and he might lose this rare opportunity if word leaked out that he stayed home till his wife had better dreams. Misogyny is never far off in Caesar's Rome, and he somewhat reluctantly consents to go.

If the several assassins had any doubt about Caesar's boundless ambition—their so-called noble reason for killing him—his grandiose speech comparing himself to the North Star would more than convince them, remembering these are men eager to be convinced. The microcosm-macrocosm is fully at work. No man with the slightest trace of humility could make this speech. Only one life seems to matter, that of the speaker.

CAESAR

I could be well moved if I were as you.
If I could pray to move, prayers would move me.
But I am constant as the North Star,
Of whose true fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.
The skies are painted with unnumbered sparks;
They are all fire, and every one doth shine;
But there's but one in all doth hold his place.
So in the world: 'tis furnished well with men,
And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive;
Yet in the number I do know but one
That unassailable holds on his rank,
Unshaken of motion; and that I am he
Let me a little show it even in this —
That I was constant Cimber should be banished,
And constant do remain to keep him so.

Julius Caesar

Act Three, Scene One

lines 58-73

Caesar is not only arrogantly boastful, but stubborn. He is not a metaphor. He is not like the North Star. Rather he is the North Star. Recall Caesar suffers from both epilepsy and deafness in one ear. This prolonged display of self-greatness is what the conspirators fear and cannot tolerate. Presumably the North Star could not be seen last night under the terrible storm.

The play's mesmerizing action continues unabated to the close, but we focus on Ficino's Hermetic influence, and this ends with Caesar's assassination. Marc Antony, Caesar's beloved and grieving friend, will make a solo prophecy in Act Three, that comes all too true in the play's final two acts.

ANTONY

Over thy wounds now do I prophesy —
Which like dumb mouths do ope their ruby lips
To be, the voice and utterance of my tongue —
A curse shall light upon the limbs of men;
Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
Shall cumber all the parts of Italy.

Julius Caesar

Act Three, Scene One

lines 263-297

Marc Antony's funeral oration is one of the finest moments in English literature, but he did not require Thrice-Great Hermes, nor do the play's final two acts, though we have shown how deeply and intensely the first two acts depend on concepts held by the ancient Egyptian seer. Shakespeare never had to read the *Hermetica* to pick up on prevailing ideas and concepts in his age. If Shakespeare had not contemplated the legendary Emerald Tablet, his characters give evidence of having done so.

This strong conclusion also occurs in *Coriolanus*, another play based primarily on politics, with the main character bearing the title. Quite simply Coriolanus is the greatest warrior, the most successful individual fighting machine that Rome ever produced. He lived in a classical age, and can be considered more devastating at wielding a battle-sword than Hector or Achilles. Though Coriolanus talks extensively—and Shakespeare was never better at letting a character unknowingly reveal himself—his problems are entirely verbal, off the battlefield, when facing large crowds of ordinary people who are not soldiers and know next to nothing about soldiering.

We will provide the basic summary of this play, because it is far less well-known than *Julius Caesar*. This is unfortunate, but sadly so. This author keeps expecting the Freudians in the wing to leap out and jump at *Coriolanus*, but so far this has not happened, at least not nearly to the extent of Hamlet and Gertrude. The audience first meets the protagonist called Caius Martius, who will soon single-handedly conquer the town of Corioles from the Volsces, traditional warlike enemy of Rome. As a reward for his remarkable valour, not unlike a Marvel Comic superhero, the hero has the town Corioles added to his birth name, and shall hereafter be called Coriolanus.

The newly minted Coriolanus is proud and vain of his victories, and not without reason. He has been an outstanding battle warrior since his mid teens, earning the coveted oak leaf three times. His mother Volumnia is immensely proud; her son, her only child, is her glory, and she rejoices even in his bloody wounds, for they can only be viewed as exulted badges of honor. Coriolanus has a wife, Virgilia, but she sadly remains dominated by her mother-in-law. He has a young male son, Martius, who at an early age takes after his father by tormenting butterflies, sometimes tearing them to shreds, even with his teeth. Another woman, Voleria, a chaste woman of Rome—we know little else about her—spends considerable time in this home, clearly dominated by women even when the great Coriolanus is present. Perhaps Coriolanus requires his monumental public ego to compensate for the burden and strain of his home life. Shakespeare does not come out and tell us, but inferences abound. In *Julius Caesar*, both Caesar and Brutus have admirable marriages. This could never be said for Coriolanus, whose wife is only given a chance line when her mother-in-law is not speaking.

Perhaps to compensate for his exhausting home life, a battlefield the mighty warrior can never conquer, Coriolanus violates the Neo-Platonic hierarchy by acting all too often as if he might consider himself a god. This position will prove unforgivable. The Brutus in this play, a minor character, makes a major incisive statement to the protagonist, "You speak o' th' people as if you were a god / To punish, not a man of their infirmity." Act Three, Scene One, lines 85-86. This could be the thesis statement of the play. After his triumph at Corioles, the hero must politely and humbly beseech a crowd of lower-class citizens for their permission to sit in the Senate. He cannot do so. He tries on two occasions, and wildly, swiftly loses his temper both times. He considers himself above all men, all classes, all priorities.

Brutus again is given the lines depicting the hero's boundless, derogating superiority.

BRUTUS

We must suggest the people in what hatred
He still hath held them; that to's power he would
Have made them mules, silenced their pleaders,
And dispropertied their freedoms, holding them
In human action and capacity
Of no more soul nor fitness for the world
Than camels in their war, who have their provaned
Only for bearing burdens, and sore blows
For sinking under them.

Coriolanus

Act Two, Scene One

lines 242-249

According to Brutus, the hero has pushed good faithful citizens far down the line of the Neo-Platonic hierarchy till they are no

more than mindless beasts of the field. For such disgraceful language—Coriolanus always gets in trouble by talking in public—the hero must be punished severely. He has too many battle wounds on him to be executed, so the punishment will be banishment.

Coriolanus leaves Rome, after a long melodramatic scene with the women in his household, showing a revengeful fury. He can never see his own errors of judgement—a god is not really required to do this. Coriolanus, with as strong a taste for melodrama as violence, heads for the enemy camp of the Volsces, the longtime enemy of Rome, the same enemy he single-handedly defeated at Corioles. The Volsces rejoice at last to have him among their number, and plan a sudden attack on Rome, with Coriolanus sharing co-leadership with Aufidius, the lead general and ferocious enemy of Rome, until long moments ago a determined enemy of Coriolanus.

So much has changed, and yet so much has stayed the same. If anything, Coriolanus' ego has become even larger. He cannot share leadership in battle with Aufidius, who so graciously made the offer. Aufidius will make several curt, angry speeches how Coriolanus has violated their agreement to share command—a subtle violation of the Neo-Platonic hierarchy—but the battle strategy is too far underway to effect a serious complaint, assuming that Coriolanus could ever climb down off his Olympian throne long enough to listen. Not likely. Coriolanus is a Shakespeare character who does not develop or change. He failed twice to address the Roman commoners in a polite, civilized tone. Presumably he would have failed fifty times, but Shakespeare was wise enough to get on with his play.

Word does reach Rome that Coriolanus has joined the Volsces with his demeanor unchanged. Cominius, a general, is

given the lines that so aptly describe this. He is asked if Coriolanus should join the enemy. He savors the irony in the word if and replies:

COMINIUS

If? He is their god. He leads them like a thing
Made by some other deity than nature,
That shapes man better, and they follow him
Against us brats with no less confidence
Than boys pursuing summer butterflies,
Or butchers killing flies.

Coriolanus

Act Four, Scene Six

lines 94-98

Eventually Coriolanus will fully betray Aufidius. Before the battle has started, our hero will be approached by his talkative mother, with his wife, son, and curiously Valeria along as mere extras. It will be his mother and only her who persuades him to stop the attack, while poor Aufidius sits idly by listening.

Coriolanus' ego is intact as he approaches this key conversation, "My mother bows, / In supplication nod," Act Five, Scene Three, lines 29-30. His extreme self-importance, always a violation of hierarchy, will only let him think in cosmic terms. If biology required him to have a mother, she must be from Olympus. A few lines later he will refer to his wife Virgilia as, "the jealous queen of heaven." Our hero obviously could not marry and share his loins with an earthly woman.

At line 94 of Act Five, Scene Three, Volumnia will begin talking to her son, and she will talk at great length. He is not an easy boy to convince. Perhaps her most persuasive and

convincing lines are when she allows her unruly son to rise up the hierarchy.

VOLUMNIA

Speak to me, son.

Thou has affected the fine strains of honour,
To imitate the graces of the gods,
To tear with thunder the wide cheeks o' th' air,
And yet to charge thy sulphur with a bolt
That should but rive an oak. Why dost not speak?

Coriolanus

Act Five, Scene Three

lines 149-154

When Coriolanus finally gives in, he can of course only do so in cosmic terms, mingled with a son's stern duty.

CORIOLANUS

O mother, mother!

What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
They laugh at. O my mother, mother, O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome;
But for your son, believe it, O believe it,
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,
If not most mortal to him. But let it come.

Coriolanus

Act Five, Scene Three

lines 183-190

He has become mortal again, for the first time since the play opened and he cruelly turned aside the starving commoners' desperate need for corn. Had he done this, he might have saved more lives than he had ever taken.

Of course Coriolanus must die before the play closes. By yielding to his mother—imagine General Eisenhower calling off Normandy by such a request—he has displayed both feet of clay, not too solid clay, clay all too easy to be shattered. He led a proud, eventful life, though not a good one. The murdered Caesar could still rightly be called noble, but never Coriolanus. Perhaps these were not the best two plays to compare. Calpurnia could not keep Caesar from venturing out to the Senate, but Volumnia could keep her son from anything, unless it were grasping onto a solid hold on honor, which this play lacks in all its characters, save Menenius, the wise elderly politician who often felt like a father toward Coriolanus. Likely he was a paternal figure most often, and yet despite his best worthy efforts, so deeply disappointed.

Chapter Fifty-six:

Magic in Comedy, Romance and Tragedy

Specific influences on Shakespeare are difficult to pin down, if we intend to set a passage by a previous writer beside a passage in *Othello* or *Lear* and proclaim: ah, cause and effect. Shakespeare is much too original, far-reaching, and subtle. But Renaissance magic does dominate three of his major plays—*The Tempest*, *Macbeth*, and *Midsummer Night's Dream*—and the playwright wouldn't have placed such bold, differing aspects on magic if the subject in its many varieties was not familiar to his audience.

The subject of course starts with Ficino, who influenced numerous Renaissance minds, many who combined creative with philosophical work. Botticelli who lived in Ficino's Florence represents a great painter cut out of Ficino's mold. Giordano Bruno represents the magical-mystical poet with strong links to Ficino. Bruno lived in Elizabethan London from 1582 to 1585, when he composed a magical sonnet cycle titled, *Heroic Enthusiasms*. Bruno became close friends with Philip Sidney, who composed the first great sonnet cycle in English; Shakespeare would compose the last. Though a generation

apart, both Sidney and Shakespeare would use occult imagery in their sonnets. They follow the method of numerous minor Italian sonneteers throughout the sixteenth century—all leading back to Ficino’s Florence. Sidney was close friends with John Dee, a genuine English magus, with an expertise in math, astrology, and navigation. In 1558 Queen Elizabeth I would not plan her coronation day till John Dee declared the stars in proper alignment. Dee is often considered a rough model for Shakespeare’s magus Prospero in *The Tempest*.

Why the need for this collection of interweaving facts, which could go on to fill a book, though perhaps not a very interesting one? Because a detailed, disciplined, Ficinian, Neo-Platonic analysis of our three plays—*The Tempest*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—might appear slightly far-fetched or over-reaching to readers in the early twenty-first century, but not to Shakespeare’s original audience, and to that audience we wish to become. Our first step is Shakespeare’s definition of a poet, and the poet’s states of mind within a magical context. Plato’s rendition of the soul’s struggle for control is brought to mind. The dialogue is *Phaedrus*, as always translated by Ficino. The soul is like a chariot driven by two horses, one of passion, the other of reason. The conflict is ceaseless. For Shakespeare the energy is ceaseless. Reason is not to be discounted, but the passions shall always be driving the three mind sets, turned loose in a magical woodland, which Plato could never have known or comprehended. Shakespeare gives this speech to Theseus, the male political leader of Athens, which borders the woodland.

THESEUS

More strange than true. I never may believe
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
See Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination
That if it would but apprehend some joy
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed or bear.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Act Five, Scene One

lines 2-22

Theseus describes what Shakespeare attempts to do in this play and several others. Macbeth eventually becomes the “madman who holds more devils than hell can hold.” No such madness exists in our other two plays, unless we count the sub-human ravings of Caliban.

Shakespeare uses “imagination” three times in this passage so the term was important to him. This indicates a Hermetic influence, for the *Corpus Hermetica* talks frequently of magic, especially the type that turns bush into bear. The lover

and poet seem to slide together, a common theme of sonnet sequences; Theseus is speaking of himself and the other characters who love and give forth great poetry, but he also speaks of Shakespeare, the magnificent creator of all. The four, young human lovers in this play are gifted at loving at first sight—with the use or disuse of magical potions—and this surely requires great feats of imagination: I look at you once, I look at you twice, I love you forever. Shakespeare must provide these four characters with brilliantly convincing passages of romantic love, often parodying the sonnet craze, for these scenes to be convincing. The magic is not so much in potions, though they help, as in language.

What Shakespeare above all provides—in our three plays under discussion—is a stage filled with nearly unlimited possibilities. Puck and Ariel are sprites, subtle forms of pixies or spirits, that are not exactly alike and defy precise definition. What they do hold in common is unwavering obedience to a master. Where they differ is in masters; Puck's master is Oberon, absorbed in magic, king of magic, ruler of supernal forces in the woods about him. Ariel's master is the all-too-human Prospero, magus supreme, perhaps more powerful over the elements than any character in Shakespeare, yet who gains the audience's admiration by the human gift of mercy towards his numerous enemies, whom he possibly could have frozen into statues until the end of time. Macbeth's three witches, followed by Hecate, would seem to differ from our two sprites—dark magic versus white—except for the similar quality that brings magic to the entire stage: language.

The witches, like the sprites, speak in rhyming couplets with two to three beats per line. All three fill the mystic air around them with a folkloric avalanche of specific, often

tongue-twisting images. The sprites are often comic. The witches are dark and brooding. Both set supernal moods, themes, atmospheres that can never be escaped till the play's close. These rhymers are not the only supernal characters in our three plays, but their incessant liveliness sets a foundation. Had Macbeth never met the weird sisters, he might have lived out his life content as Thane of Cawdor, and he certainly would not have been so desperately foolish to fear no man of woman born.

Macbeth's play is not truly set in Scotland, but on a gloomy, supernal, ever-widening entrance to hell. The place names are arbitrary, as is the Italian city Prospero has been expelled from, or the city-state Theseus rules. Would *The Tempest* be different if Prospero was expelled from France or Portugal? What matters is the near all-powerful magic that pervades his island, an island with no name, and the turbulent sea around it. Oberon could rule a magic woods outside any city-state, for what matters is the charming, delightful, sometimes out-of-control mischievous magic of the enchanted woods he calls home. These three essential settings—Macbeth's hell, Prospero's island, and Oberon's wood—are created and sustained by language, and to a large extent, Shakespeare must make this language magical.

Consider the extraordinary powers of the weird sisters' culinary recipes:

FIRST WITCH

Round about the cauldron go,
In the poisoned entrails throw.
Toad that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Sweltered venom sleeping got,
Boil thou first i' th' charmed pot.

ALL

Double, double, toil and trouble,
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

SECOND WITCH

Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the cauldron boil and bake.
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

ALL

Double, double, toil and trouble,
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

Macbeth
Act Four, Scene One
lines 4-22

This hellish recipe continues for twenty lines till Hecate, queen of Hades and protectress of witches, arrives, and the rhyming verse becomes more furious. If a poetry of hell exists, this would be it. Macbeth enters after this part of the sisters' performance is over. But the sisters have more visions of hell to show him. Three apparitions tell Macbeth he needs not fear until the moving of Burnam wood toward Dunsinane nor any enemy not born of woman. He acts the fool. He now has many enemies—surely one might be born in a strange or curious way.

Shakespeare uses other devices than witches to create a landscape of hell across his stage. Several times his characters give speeches that contain supernal omens of horrific times

soon to come. Lennox, a minor character, delivers eight condensed lines of omens soon after King Duncan's murder, though Lennox does not know of the crime.

LENNOX

The night has been unruly. Where we lay
Our chimneys were blown down, and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i' th' air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
New-hatched to th' woeful time. Some day the earth
Was feverous and did shake.

Macbeth

Act Two, Scene Three
lines 53-59

Only moments later MacDuff will find Duncan's murdered body.

When the outraged screaming over the bloody deed has ceased, Shakespeare inserts a short scene between Ross and a nameless Old Man, who presents essential omens that Macbeth is verging on leading Scotland straight to hell.

OLD MAN

Threescore and ten I can remember well,
Within the volume of which time I have seen
Hours dreadful and things strange, but this sore night
Hath trifled former knowings.

ROSS

Ha, good father,
Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threatens his bloody stage. By th' clock 'tis day,

And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp.
Is't night's predominance or the day's shame
That darkness does the face of earth entomb
When living light should kiss it?

OLD MAN

'Tis unnatural,
Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last
A falcon, tow'ring in her pride of place,
Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed.

ROSS

And Duncan's horses—a thing most strange and certain—
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would
Make war with mankind.

OLD MAN

'Tis said they ate each other.

ROSS

They did so, to the' amazement of mine eyes
That looked upon't.

Macbeth
Act Two, Scene Four
lines 1-19

The astonishment does not exist only in Macbeth's cursed kingdom. Shakespeare reinforces this fact by comparing Macbeth with England's virtuous King Edward, who can heal simply by touching, called in occult circles the King's Touch.

Malcolm, the heir to Scotland's throne (should he escape Macbeth's ruthless violence), describes Edward's gift.

MALCOLM

'Tis called the evil —
A most miraculous work in this good King,
Which often since my here-remain in England
I have seen him do. How he solicits heaven
Himself best knows, but strangely visited people,
All swell'n and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surging he cures,
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,
Put on with holy prayers; and 'tis spoken,
To the succeeding royalty he leaves
The healing benediction. With this strange virtue
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,
And sundry blessings hang about his throne
That speak him full of grace.

Macbeth

Act Four, Scene Three

lines 147-159

Malcolm no sooner concludes this informative speech, when Ross enters and again divulges the supernal horror of his country.

ROSS

Alas, poor country,
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing
But who knows nothing is once seen to smile;
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems

A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell
Is there scarce asked for who, and good men's lives
Empire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken.

Macbeth

Act Four, Scene Three
lines 165-174

Unlike King Edward, the wicked Macbeth is unable to cure or assist his wife's mental illness. His magic can only be dark. His habit of blaming his troubles on others, notably witches, occurs here for he lambastes a doctor with his dissatisfaction.

DOCTOR

Not so sick, my lord,
As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies
That keep her from the rest.

MACBETH

cure of that.

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

DOCTOR

Therein the patient
Must minister to himself.

MACBETH

Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it.

Macbeth

Act Five, Scene Three

lines 39-50

Macbeth next prepares for the military battle that shall finally destroy him.

Obviously the famous passages in *Macbeth* have been overlooked in this essay, passages which generations of students have been uplifted by close study and memorization. We have overlooked Macbeth's brief steps into total madness when he twice witnesses Banquo's ghost; those are two more vital scenes of the gates of hell, or Hecate's Hades, that swing open before him. But these ghost scenes, superbly done, do not violate the Neo-Platonic hierarchy of our omen passages. Macbeth's crimes, shared by his wife, have driven the nature—a big word for Shakespeare—of his setting totally out of whack. At the play's tragic close, King Malcolm's people not only need a substantial time to heal, but also the landscape, the farm animals, the creatures that run wild, all that lives and breathes in the cruel, brutal apocalyptic setting Macbeth has set down upon it.

In our other two plays set to Shakespeare's magic touch, the terms hellish or black magic need never apply. The magic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has the rollicking frivolity of well-played practical jokes, with even the unhappy victims, most notably Helena, not suffering too long, and with the steadfast assurance of happy endings for all, just as soon as the loveable mischievous Puck learns to turn his pranks in the correct manner. The magic in *The Tempest*, though never dark, deals with serious political issues, the evil betrayal and

overthrow of one brother by another, a furious storm at sea (hence the play's title) that scares the life out of all potential victims, a near rape scene from which Miranda escaped the unruly sub-human Caliban, and Ariel's ever eagerness for freedom from his master. It would never occur to Puck to seek freedom or any change in status. The only note of high seriousness in *Midsummer* is Egeus considering his daughter Hermia's death if she fails to marry the partner he has chosen. Hermia of course resists, or we might not have a story—we might not get into those magic woods where the unexpected can be counted on to happen.

The single imagery that dominates *Midsummer* is moonlight. On eighteen separate instances the moon enters a passage. This could not be coincidence, not that many. Shakespeare's moon is tinged with the white magic that glows ceaselessly on Oberon's woods. Puck might not be able to find his way around without it. Nearly all scenes are set at night when all supernal beliefs of the moon are most powerful; the moon is associated with lunacy, with control of the tides, a natural force, with Diana's realm, the goddess of purity and marriage, and with Aristotle's boundary between aether, a comic supernatural essence above the moon, and the basic earthly elements below. Shakespeare disregards Aristotle, and lets a pervasive force like aether inhabit his woodland. The play opens with Theseus and Hippolyta, the humans from Athens soon about to celebrate their nuptials, each talking of the controlling, poetic forces of the moon. Shakespeare's moon shall always be poetic.

THESEUS

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in

Another moon—But O, methinks how slow
This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires
Like to a stepdame or a dowager
Long withering out a young man's revenue.

HIPPOLYTA

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night,
Four nights will quickly dream away the time;
And then the moon, like to a silver bow
New bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Act One, Scene One

lines 1-11

The flower that provides Oberon and Puck with the magic love-potion is also moon-based. Oberon leads Puck to this discussion by a wonderful imaginative passage, rich in bringing all parts of the Neo-Platonic tower together. If this is possible, so is possible whatever magic Oberon seeks.

OBERON

My gentle Puck, come hither. Thou rememb'rest
Since once I sat upon a promontory
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea-maid's music?

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Act Two, Scene One

lines 147-154

With this remarkable passage accomplished, the magical intensity has been heightened, and Oberon is next ready to explain the source of his love potion, love-in-idleness.

We quote this long passage because the mightiest gods of Greek mythology come to this sacred wood outside Athens. If mistakes are made, they will be Puck's mistakes, not Cupid's.

OBERON

That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,
Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid, all armed. A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon,
And the imperial vot'ress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
Yet marked I where the bolt of Cupid fell.
It fell upon a little western flower —
Before, milk-white; now, purple with love's wound —
And maidens call it love-in-idleness.
Fetch me that flower; the herb I showed thee once.
The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid
Will make or man or woman madly dote
Upon the next live creature that it sees,
Fetch me this herb, and be thou here again
Ere the leviathan can swim a league.

A Midsummer Night's Dream
Act Two, Scene One
lines 155-174

When Puck mistakenly puts the love potion on the wrong young man's eyes, trouble not only ensues for the four young lovers, but the nature of the gods, the woods, and all personal behavior is torn out of whack. This magic might never turn dark, but momentarily it can be frighteningly powerful. Helena, in two short speeches, defiantly makes these points.

HELENA

The wildest hath not such a heart as you.
Run when you will. The story shall be changed:
Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase.
The dove pursues the griffin, the mild hind
Makes speed to catch the tiger; bootless speed
When cowardice pursues, and valour flies.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Act Two, Scene One

lines 229-234

A few scenes earlier, Titania, goddess of fairies, makes a similar speech, with strikingly similar themes, of over thirty lines, Act Two, Scene One, lines 81 to 117. She does not fail to mention the all-encompassing moon, "Therefore the moon, the governess of floods, / Pale in her anger washes all the air, / That rheumatic diseases do abound."

Titania is best remembered for falling in love with Bottom when the would-be actor wears an Ass's head. Clearly Oberon's mischief-making has again gotten nature out of whack, but all in fun, except for the temporary victims. Shakespeare's audience would have been reminded of an ancient text, *The Golden Asse* by the Latin classical author Apuleius. This slapstick, picaresque comedy was translated into a popular English edition by William Adlington in 1566. Lucius, Apuleius' protagonist, suffers far more and far longer

than Bottom for his ass's head, as well as complete ass's body, but his devout prayers to Isis get his regular human person back. Bottom requires nothing so formal, just a current use of this always tricky woodland magic.

The longest sustained magical scene between Oberon and Puck (Robin) occurs in Act Three, Scene Two, starting at line 346 and not ending till line 400. This is obviously too long to quote in full, but Shakespeare is endlessly inventive—that Hermetic imagination at work—in piling one wondrous image on top of another. The result is a stage where any possibility overturning nature beneath the moon is likely to happen. This magical language is best seen from Oberon. Magic is his business, at which he is most adept.

OBERON

But we are spirits of another sort.
I with the morning's love have oft made sport,
And like a forester the groves may tread
Even till the eastern gate, all fiery red,
Opening on Neptune with fair blessed beams
Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.
But notwithstanding, haste, make no delay;
We may effect this business yet ere day.

A Midsummer's Night Dream

Act Three, Scene Two

lines 389-396

Of course *Midsummer* concludes with all the proper lovers getting together—forgiveness is bliss. Let Puck's epilogue conclude this section of the essay. Why? Because of the sharp contrast in content with the weird sisters, and yet ever so close in rhyme and meter.

Though no exact dates of composition can be given, *The Tempest* is often considered Shakespeare's last play, his magnificent farewell before departing the London stage for his native Stratford. If *The Tempest* is not Shakespeare's last utterance on paper, it is close, and this adds interest to the play's entire plot and action being controlled by a white magus, Prospero. Prospero not only causes the relentless fury of the storm which opens the play, but he controls each member of the ship which he has placed in such grave danger. He will maintain this control, with able assistance from his loyal sprite Ariel, until Prospero stands alone on the stage at the play's close.

Miranda, like the audience, must learn some background history of her magus father before the play can be understood. Prospero appears wearing his magic cloak with staff. When Miranda was but three, she lived with Prospero in Milan, where he was duke. But he abdicated his political powers to his brother Antonio; Prospero preferred to study, "The government I cast upon my brother, / And to my state grew stranger, being transported / And rapt in secret studies." Act One, Scene Two, lines 75-77. Prospero became a great magus through those studies, and this is his one connecting point with John Dee, the reigning magus of Elizabeth's reign, who accumulated countless books on the occult and magic in a vast private library. Shakespeare might have been thinking of Dee when he wrote those lines.

But Prospero's magus cannot prevent Antonio's sudden betrayal, for the false brother takes over the dukedom and sends Prospero and his toddler on a creaking craft out to sea. Why couldn't Prospero's magic prevent this, when twelve years later Prospero can employ it to start a fierce storm and dominate the play? Answers must only be speculation. Before Antonio

wickedly cast him out to sea, probably assuming certain swift death, Gonzalo, an old and loyal friend of Prospero, gives the desperate seafarer several of his prized books. Twelve years of contemplating those books have given Prospero immense powers. No other character comes close to Prospero in his ability to control other people and life forms. Apparently when Shakespeare could control no more, he retired, like Prospero, and returned to Stratford.

Caliban, the sub-human fishlike creature, seeks to rebel against his master Prospero in Act Three, Scene Two. His intelligence is not high, but he does realize the power of Prospero's books, "Remember / First to possess his books, for without them / He's but a sot as I am, nor hath not / One spirit to command ... Born but his books," lines 92-95. Caliban is plotting with two drunken members of the shipwreck. But since none of the three possess magic or counter-magic, no serious threat is posed.

In describing the island to his two tipsy companions, Caliban shows his senses work properly in spite of his steadfast sluggishness.

CALIBAN

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about my ears, and sometime voices
That if I then had waked after long sleep
Will make me asleep again; and then in dreaming
The clouds methought would open and show riches

Ready to drop me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.

The Tempest

Act Three, Scene Two

lines 138-146

When Caliban's plot has been easily foiled, Prospero acknowledges his witch mother did hold supernal powers. Her name was Sycorax. She alone might have given Prospero a slight competition, though she never appears.

PROSPERO

This misshapen knave,
His mother was a witch, and one so strong
That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs,
And deal in her command without her power.

The Tempest

Act Five, Scene One

lines 271-274

Ariel is not given as many long rhyming songs as Puck or the weird sisters, but she does hold that gift. Her verbal energies are devoted more to reviewing her sad history, where she had been trapped in a tree till Prospero released her, and how she longs for freedom from the magus' command. Freedom to do what? Shakespeare never says. Ariel, like Caliban, is important because the island contains a strange Neo-Platonic hierarchy. Ariel parallels human traits; she feels compassion for all the shipwrecked crew, which subtly influences her master's strong final turn toward mercy. Caliban has human traits—he speaks English, often quite well—but he lacks the appearance and moral imperatives to be truly human.

Prospero (and Shakespeare) withhold their greatest virtuoso display of magical language till Act V. Prospero wears his magic robes, and begins by drawing a circle, a common sign of a magical rite, for what might be the last time. We quote the first fifty-plus lines of this remarkable utterance, which starts with specific, strange folkloric magic and proceeds to magic which controls the elements, earth, wind, rain, fire, magic which competes with heaven and the pagan gods, magic and music, magic more powerful than Ficino expected, though perhaps not Bruno—when Prospero closes with, “I’ll drown my book,” the source of his awesome powers. He has no more to say about our subject that both brings and shatters peace, and therefore neither shall we.

PROSPERO

Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves,
And ye that on the sands with printless foot
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him
When he comes back; you demi-puppets that
By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make
Whereof the ewe not bites; and you whose pastime
Is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice
To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid,
Weak masters though ye be, I have bedimmed
The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,
And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault
Set roaring war—to the dread rattling thunder
Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak
With his own bolt; the strong-based promontory
Have I made shake, and by the spurs plucked up
The pine and cedar; graves at my command
Have waked their sleeper, oped, and let 'em forth

By my so potent art. But this rough magic
I here adjure. And when I have required
Some heavenly music—which even now I do—
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is far, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathom in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.

The Tempest

Act Five, Scene One

lines 33-57

Chapter Fifty-seven:

Three Final Romances

The most controversial passage Ficino ever translated or wrote is a brief section in *Asclepius* about god-making. Ficino had several times written in his commentaries about drawing down celestial powers into human souls or consciousness, but take away the numerous astral images and we are left with an experience not totally different from ordinary prayer or contemplation. The latter is Ficino's favorite term for human experience. Meanwhile the god-making passage is totally different. Believed to be authored and practiced by Thrice-Great Hermes, the great Egyptian magus laments that he cannot create angels or demons and their souls out of thin air by supernal means.

Yet he does not lament long because he has another method: he can attract angels and demons and their souls from the supernal regions above, and direct them to a permanent presence into human handmade statues. What the magus states has a slight subtlety about it. He cannot lead about gods at his beck and call, but he can transform a statue into a god by infusing the god's soul permanently inside it. The magus does

not quite say how he does this, and most surely Ficino does not know, though Ficino never talked of a higher level of magic in any of his copious writings, nor did he translate anything, no matter how brief, that put him at such risk with church authorities. Perhaps it was the sheer brevity of the passage that kept Ficino out of trouble, or perhaps he couldn't be blamed for what had been written by a prophet of Christianity, a contemporary of Moses. Or perhaps we shall never know. We will do well to quote this passage in full, expertly translated by Brian P. Copenhaver.

But then they discovered the art of making gods.
To their discovery they added a comfortable power arising from the nature of matter. Because they could not make souls, they mixed this power in and called up the souls of demons or angels and implanted them in likenesses through holy and divine mysteries, whence the idols could have power to do good and evil.

(Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, Cambridge U. Press, 1992, p. 90)

D. P. Walker, our foremost student on Renaissance magic, often uses this passage as a benchmark as to how deeply his historical personage held to magical beliefs—hence to trust this passage was to believe very deeply.

Shakespeare's belief in events similar to the god-making passage is very strong in three romances he composed near the end of his career: *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*. Note: *Pericles* is only divided into scenes, with no acts to separate them. Romance is not the best defining term for these plays. Magical romance would be better, for each has a wildly unlikely plot that strains the credulity of the audience and could not be

sustained to a happy conclusion without a consistent use of Hermetic magic.

In *Pericles*, whenever a ship is thrashed by thunderous storms, amounting to the best poetry in the play, the ship lands in the exact geographical site required to keep the improbable plot on schedule. This represents how all seems to happen by chance in these three romances, and yet nothing truly occurs by chance. Shakespeare is the great magus, and he has created a wide array of characters, both vivid and stilted, to move along his tales. *Pericles* moves from royal courts to a wickedly comic brothel and back to court again. Pericles himself never seems to stop travelling—these romances are always in motion—though never reaching his goals till the final scenes.

A basic outline of the three romances is deceptively simple. A king or prince is separated from wife or children, many years pass—fourteen in *Pericles*, twenty in *Cymbeline*, sixteen in *Winter's Tale*—and the families are startlingly reunited through coincidences that take the characters' breath away, if not the audience. Why these long separations? Shakespeare is showing a wounded, betrayed cosmos, with significant parts harmfully out of whack; such a horrifying confusion will take time to heal, especially if that healing is to be full and satisfying. The cosmos is occult in the Hermetic sense; the parts pulled apart must come back together. Only virtuous behavior on the characters' parts makes this possible.

Consider the opposite, when Antiochus and his daughter persist in their sin of incest. No human force can stop them. The walls around their city are filled with decapitated heads who tried. Recall the basic Hermetic teaching: as above, so below. The “most high gods” are sufficiently angry at the repeated

incest, and they strike down the sinners in horrifying fashion. Helicanus recounts the supernal event.

HELICANUS

No, Aeschines, know this of me:
Antiochus from incest lived not free,
For which the most high gods, not minding longer
To hold the vengeance that they had in store
Due to this heinous capital offence,
Even in the height and pride of all his glory,
When he was seated in a chariot
Of an inestimable value, and
His daughter with him, both appareled all in jewels,
A fire from heaven came and shriveled up
Their bodies e'en to loathing, for they so stunk
That all those eyes adored them ere their fall
Scorn now their hands should give them burial.

Pericles

Scene Eight

lines 1-13

This punishment is lasting and decisive. But the gods can save and reward, as we shall soon see.

It's highly unlikely Shakespeare had our *Asklepius* passage before him when he composed his three romances, but the possibility of statues or dead humans coming to life defines these plays. Otherwise the required happy endings could not happen. When Pericles reunites with his daughter Marina after fourteen years—he last saw her as a newborn babe—he could not possibly recognize her, though he does note resemblances to her lost mother Thaisa. This astounding recognition is not unlike a nameless statue coming to recognizable life—a time to rejoice beyond understanding. Shakespeare uses this same plot

device when Leontes recovers his lost daughter, also last seen as a newborn, after sixteen years. What else could she be, at first recognition, but an unbelievable artist's representation of his greatest joy come to life. Leontes has a greater joy to follow, but holds onto his daughter, recovered after the deep sleep of permanent loss and *mea culpa* breast-beating. A statue come to life could hardly be more wonderful, and yet that shall happen. Cymbeline is reunited with his two sons, stolen when aged two and three, and a similar grandiose display of affections occurs. In these occult romances, no matter how long the delay, parent and child were meant to be together.

What about husband and wife? Paulina, a major Hermetic player, is married to Antigonus, who is killed by a bear offstage, later described as torn limb from limb. Prophecy plays a part in these romances, and soon prior to his death, Antigonus has a troubling vivid dream of the lost queen Hermione. We quote this dream in full, because it is often overlooked, and because it emphasizes Shakespeare's supernal concerns, which come from the Renaissance world of magic.

ANTIGONUS

I have heard, but not believed, the spirits o' th' dead
May walk again. If such thing be, thy mother
Appeared to me last night, for ne'er was dream
So like a waking. To me comes a creature,
Sometimes her head on one side, some another.
I never saw a vessel of like sorrow,
So filled and so becoming. In pure white robes
Like very sanctity she did approach
My cabin where I lay, thriced bowed before me,
And, gasping to begin some speech, her eyes
Became two spouts. The fury spent, anon

Did this break from her: "Good Antigonus,
Since fate, against thy better disposition,
Hath made thy person for the thrower-out
Of my poor babe according to thine oath,
Places remote enough are in Bohemia.
These weep, and leave it crying; and for the babe
Is counted lost for ever, Perdita
I prithee call't. For this ungentle business
Put on thee by my lord, thou ne'er shalt see
Thy wife Paulina more." And so with shrieks
She melted into air. Affrighted much,
I did in time collect myself, and thought
This was so, and no slumber. Dreams are toys,
Yet for this once, yea superstitiously,
I will be squared by this. I do believe
Hermione hath suffered death, and that
Apollo would—this being indeed the issue
Of King Polixenes—it should here be laid,
Either for life or death, upon the earth
Of its right father. Blossom, speed thee well.

The Winter's Tale

Act Three, Scene Three

lines 14-45

Antigonus concludes by laying down the babe with a scroll. He next lays down a box. All this will later help to identify the royal child. The vicious bear next arrives.

Magic will not save Antigonus, but the most remarkable display of the Hermetic art will rescue Thaisa in *Pericles*. Cerimon is the Paracelsus in Shakespeare. He is the physician who cures, known throughout Ephesus for his remarkable healing powers. He casts out the old authorities and studies the

new. Like Paracelsus, he learns from experience, and he finds this treasury of medical knowledge “in vegetatives, in metals, stone.” He requires sixteen lines to display his closeness to Paracelsus.

CERIMON

I held it ever
Virtue and cunning were endowments greater
Than nobleness and riches. Careless heirs
May the two latter darken and dispend,
But immortality attends the former,
Making man a god. 'Tis known I ever
Have studied physic, through which secret art,
By turning o'er authorities, I have,
Together with my practice, made familiar
To me and to my aid the blest infusions
That dwells in vegetives, in metals, stones,
And so can speak of the disturbances
That nature works, and of her cures, which doth give me
A more content and cause of true delight
Than to be thirsty after tott'ring honour,
Or tie my pleasure up in silken bags
To glad the fool and death.

Pericles

Scene Twelve

lines 23-30

Cerimon has no sooner stopped talking than a coffin is washed ashore nearby. These romances would not work, nor ever get started, without the author's ceaseless, remarkable use of coincidence. The coffin contains Thaisa, wife of Pericles, who supposedly died at sea while giving birth. Perhaps the gods are so angered at the royal incest of the play's opening scenes

that they never allow the sea to be stable. Scene Twelve continues with Cerimon confident he can bring this unknown woman back to life. He mentions an Egyptian dead nine hours brought back to life—Egypt is an obvious reference to Thrice-Great Hermes. Cerimon is a Renaissance magus bringing a human—or statue—to life, not a weak imitation of Christ raising Lazarus. The scene and play are filled with pagan imagery, not Christian; this holds true for all three occult romances. Cerimon identifies the corpse as the wife of Pericles. Now he can work his magic, which in Shakespeare must always be verbal.

CERIMON

Nay, certainly tonight,
For look how fresh she looks. They were too rash
That threw her in the sea. Make a fire within.
Fetch hither all my boxes in my closet.

(Exit Philemon)

Death may usurp on nature many hours,
And yet the fire of life kindle again
The o'erpressed spirits. I have heard
Of an Egyptian nine hours dead
Who was by good appliances recovered.

(Enter Philemon with napkins and fire)

Well said, well said, the fire and cloths.
The still and woeful music that we have,
Cause it to sound, beseech you.

(Music)

The vial once more,
How thou stirr'st, thou block! The music there!
I pray you give her air. Gentlemen,
This queen will live. Nature awakes, a warmth

Breathes out of her. She hath not been entranced
Above five hours. See how she 'gins to blow
Into life's flow's again.

FIRST GENTLEMEN

The heavens
Through you increase our wonder, and set up
Your fame for ever.

CERIMON

She is alive. Behold,
Her eyelids, cases to those heav'nly jewels
Which Pericles hath lost,
Begin to part their fringes of bright gold.
The diamonds of a most praised water
Doth appear to make the world twice rich—live,
And make us weep to hear your fate, fair creature,
Rare as you seem to be.

Pericles

Scene Twelve
lines 77-102

Thaisa will have a final rebirth in the play's final scene, number 22, when she is reunited with her husband. She had been a nun in Diana's temple for fourteen years, but that time of her life is suddenly past. In her husband's eyes, straining to see from the lack of a haircut or shave in fourteen years, she might well appear a statue reborn, a dream given life to, while he alone—and the audience—hear a lovely music of the spheres. Diana, the pagan goddess, descends from heaven, and recites a sonnet, comparing events to a dream and gently commanding all to "perform y bidding." In *Cymbeline*, Posthume will have a similar visit from Jupiter in Act Five, Scene Five.

A similar physician, Cornelius, appears in *Cymbeline*. The wicked queen asks him for a lethal potion, but Cornelius fears her intent. Instead he provides her a vial of an extraordinary strong sleeping potion which imitates death, but for a few hours. Cornelius states his fears.

CORNELIUS (aside)

I do not like her. She doth think she has
Strange ling'ring poisons. I do know her spirit,
And will not trust one of her malice with
A drug of such damned nature. Those she has
Will stupefy and dull the sense a while,
Which first, perchance, she'll prove on cats and dogs,
Then afterward up higher; but there is
No danger in what show of death it makes
More than the locking up the spirits a time,
To be more fresh, reviving. She is fooled
With a most false effect, and I the truer
So to be false with her.

Cymbeline

Act One, Scene Five

lines 33-43

As the confabulated tale endlessly unfolds, Imogen will take the potion, be mistaken for dead, and then be one more corpse or statue returned to life. The three romances do have much in common, almost like Shakespeare used interchangeable parts. The brothel in *Pericles* is wonderfully unique, Autolycus is welcome comic relief and so is Cornelius' vivid description of the Queen's death, a horrid death fitting a horrid person.

CORNELIUS

More, sir, and worse. She did confess she had
For you a mortal mineral which, being took
Should by the minute feed on life, and, ling'ring,
By inches waste you. In which time she purposed
By watching, weeping, tendance, kissing, to
O'ercome you with her show; and in fine.
When she had fit you with her craft, to work
Her son into th' adoption of the crown;
But failing of her end by this strange absence,
Grew shameless—desperate, opened in despite
Of heaven and men her purposes, repented
The evils she hatched were not effected; so
Despairing died.

Cymbeline

Act Five, Scene Six

lines 49-61

The most famous statue-come-to-life in Shakespeare, or any playwright, is the concluding scene of *The Winter's Tale*. Paulina is the magus, who told King Leontes that his wife, Queen Hermione, had died sixteen years ago of intolerable grief at his harsh treatment. Leontes had wildly accused his wife of frequent forbidden relations with his closest friend, another king. This does not hold out hope for a happy ending, but Leontes has been living in constant breast-beating remorse, and now Paulina decides the time is right for reunion, especially since Leontes has just reunited with his daughter, lost since birth. If each of these three plots sound strikingly alike, it is the playwright, not the critic.

Paulina announces to all that a brilliantly lifelike statue of Hermione has recently been completed. All joyously see the statue, which closely—all too closely—resembles Hermione as she might have looked sixteen years later, meaning today. Of course the statue comes fully to life, walking down off her pedestal and embracing her awestruck husband.

Our *Asklepius* passage has reached its finest, though far-fetched, moment in theatre. The play's ending is much too joyous to wonder how Hermione spent all those sixteen years. Did she read? Study Greek? Take up arts and crafts? No matter. The prophecy at Delphi has been fulfilled; when Leontes finds his daughter, he will find his wife, or is it the other way around, or could Leontes possibly care, now that the required prophecy has been taken care of and pleasant days look endlessly before him.

Why such emphasis on three plays that obviously are far from Shakespeare's best? Because they show what concerned him near the end of his career: the wondrous variations of Hermetic magic. The word magic is used twice when Hermione comes to life. This book's thesis is Shakespeare held this interest throughout his career. Of course Prospero makes excellent evidence, but so do these minor plays, minor only because of the much greater which Shakespeare wrote, also containing strong elements of Hermetic magic. Where would Macbeth be if he did not see that sword before him, and how much rollicking fun would Puck be without his special powers? But if a Shakespeare scholar needs extra convincing, look at these three romances, so alike and so forceful in magical content. Also to be found are individual passages of magnificence—Pericles never encounters a storm at sea that wondrous thundering language doesn't pour out of him, the

brothel scenes in *Pericles* are sustained comic brilliance, and pastoral verse never reached greater heights than Florizel and Perdita expressing their love.

Chapter Fifty-eight:

Ben Jonson's Comic Masterpiece—The Alchemist

We compare two wild, rollicking comedies: Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors*, an early masterwork though impossible of precise dating, and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, first performed in 1610, the same year when the action takes place. Shakespeare has taken a comedy by Plautus which shows one set of identical twins constantly being mistaken for each other. Laughter results, but Shakespeare decides to outdo Plautus by adding a second set of identical twins. Shakespeare's ambitious innovation allows four men, the two sets of twins, to be mistaken for each other at a breathtaking pace during a single day in Ephesus. Shakespeare has followed the traditional classical unities in *Comedy*, though this was not his main intention. He wanted his hand-clapping audience to be as delightfully puzzled as the several characters on stage are hopelessly bewildered.

Comic sparks fly in both plays, though both start very differently. *Comedy* begins with Egeon, an elderly merchant from Syracuse, finding himself both under arrest and sentenced to be beheaded at sundown, unless someone comes forth to pay

a thousand marks in his behalf. Though Solinus, Duke of Ephesus, arrests the old man and states these harsh terms, the Duke is sympathetic to the old man's plight. Ephesus and Syracuse are longtime bitter enemies, rather like the Capulets and Montagues. For a Syracusan to enter Ephesus without significant funds—as Egeon has done—is to put his life at risk. These are Ephesus' hard and fast rules, which the Duke is bound in duty to obey. Egeon assumes he knows no one in Ephesus, and so this day shall be his last.

So far not much time has been taken up on stage. But the Duke allows Egeon to tell his tale of woes, and the old man is only too glad to comply. Egeon talks for sixty lines. The Duke, not yet bored, wants more. Egeon talks another twenty-two lines, then closes with nineteen lines. Meanwhile Egeon or someone needs to explain why two sets of identical twins shall appear that day in Ephesus: Antipholus of Syracuse and his loyal bondsman Dromio, and Antipholus of Ephesus and his loyal bondsman Dromio. That loyalty shall be severely tested. Each Antipholus not only looks exactly alike, but curiously has the same name and we assume wore the same clothes. It would not do for one Antipholus to have a mustache and the other not. The same exactness adheres to the two Dromios. Master cannot tell one servant from another, and servant cannot distinguish between masters. We are set for the wondrous farce to follow.

We return to those long, interminable speeches by Egeon. He explains how both sets of twins were born—on the same day, no less—and how he and his wife Emilia (her Christian name is not introduced until the fifth act) cared for the four infants till they are all shipboard and encounter a ferocious storm. No one is better at describing such storms than Shakespeare, and Egeon expounds breathtaking poetry as his

precarious ship flounders about. The furious storm separates husband, wife, twins. For all Egeon's talking, it is never quite clear how this takes place. The audience also must be wondering.

Shakespeare contains few dramatic flaws but this must be one. Egeon endlessly holds back the start of the play's essential action. We might forgive him if he made clear the tragic source of that play's action. He is by all accounts a sympathetic figure. He has just spent seven painful, arduous years seeking alone, over vast geographic stretches, for his missing son (nameless to him) and bondsman (also nameless). Yet after all his talking, we are still not certain how the horrid storm separated his family. Not even Hamlet spoke so many lines in uninterrupted succession. A comedy should probably start with comedy. This might be one time when Shakespeare's renowned mixing of genres does not work. The comedy cannot get started till the tragic figure of Egeon gets off the stage.

Why would Shakespeare allow Egeon to talk on so? The audience almost requires notepad and quill pen to keep track of his outpourings. When the true comic action starts, their pens could never more swiftly enough keep up. Why this striking difference? Egeon is like a chorus to a Greek play, who must recount an entire play before the opening scene of the current play can start. What was Shakespeare attempting? He might have intended to show stark contrasts in time by requiring his audience to experience the sudden jolt of different uses of time. Time's passage is often a major theme in Shakespeare; a close reading of the sonnets will convince the alert reader. Egeon is contrasting his three decades of loss and suffering—we can assume he has been celibate that time, never a good thing in Shakespeare—with the coming events of a single day, over

before the sun sets. To make the audience convincingly feel this contrast in time, Egeon might require extended talking. An audience sitting on the edge of its seats awaiting the start of comic action is not all bad.

Perhaps confusion enters Egeon's speaking because the old man is exhausted, physically, emotionally, every which way. He cannot compete in oratory with Antony or Brutus. However, Shakespeare might have placed such emphasis on getting the story right because the deep structure of *Comedy* is occult, and those terrible separations at sea are the start of this occult. The astrological sign for twins is Gemini, which is an air sign, and refers to the lungs as body parts. Obviously the twins—all four—required strong lungs and all the breathing air possible to survive the storm.

Shakespeare might be working at a more basic occult. The supernal pull of the occult is to bring objects—persons, places, things—back together that have been violently yanked apart. A woman loses her best necklace and she employs rather primitive occult means—charms, amulets, memorized prayers—to bring that necklace back. If she loses the man of her dreams, she will find stronger occult means. If she watches her flower garden wither and die from lack of rain, she recites occult prayers to a rain goddess, even the Virgin Mary, for the return of abundant life to her flowers. She will repeat this process at a higher level if her child takes ill. These examples could be multiplied endlessly, becoming as tedious as Egeon's speech. What matters is the positive occult structure: terrible conditions can be significantly improved by returning things to how they once were. Supernal help is often required, the occult forces of good to overcome the demonic forces of evil. Surely

Egeon cannot think the gods have been on his side, not for a very long time.

The occult is basically about connecting, and Shakespeare stresses this belief system throughout *Comedy*. The good loving family that has been violently torn apart, through no fault of its own, will reconnect, after near countless trial and error at the play's breathtaking, mind-boggling close. What breaks apart can always be put back together again. The god or supernal force pulling the strings in *Comedy* is Shakespeare. That might be why he was so deliberately careful about Egeon's explicating the sad situation. If the audience can sit through that, it can sit through anything. Shakespeare has let his audience share Egeon's exhaustion, after which the lusty, walnut-cracking playgoers should be ready for anything.

Ben Jonson begins his comedy *The Alchemist* in directly opposite fashion. An actor will approach the audience with "The Argument" in rhyming couplets. This will quickly be followed by "The Prologue," also in rhyming couplets. In thirty lines, swiftly delivered, Jonson's audience knows the plot and primary joke of the play. A wealthy Londoner, Master Lovewit, leaves his large London house for the country to escape the plague, not an uncommon occurrence in both Elizabethan and Jacobean times. Master Lovewit has mistakenly left his house in the sole care of his butler Jeremy, who promptly turns the house into a center of both false alchemy and a rather pleasant prostitution built more on chattering and flattery than sex. Jonson probably believed all alchemy was false, though he certainly had read copiously on the subject, as well as Hermeticism, astrology, Neo-Platonism, and other popular forms of magic. For such a severe critic and doubter, Jonson

certainly knew the belief systems he was opposed to. Of course he had no doubts about prostitution. No Londoner would.

Jeremy, now landlord, takes the name Face, and apparently the actor playing him could do wondrous comic impressions with his face. Face forms a triumvirate of conning, or cheating. He uses the name in weak imitation of when ancient Rome was ruled by three emperors. Jonson is nothing if not superbly educated. The three Romans had profound differences getting along, and so will Face's makeshift triumvirate. The educated audience can enjoy Jonson's humor on several levels. Subtle is the false alchemist who has set up shop in Lovewit's house, and Dell Common is the prostitute who acts as assistant to the two rascally, cozening men. Not till Dickens would a writer hold such a gift for comic names as Jonson, with several more to come.

It is worth noting that Subtle has—or claims to have—an elaborate alchemical lab, with numerous beakers and basins, odds and ends, all with high-sounding, prestigious names. Yet no aspect of Subtle's lab ever appears on stage, and so Jonson leaves this magnificent lab up to the audience's ever-wondering imagination. This obviously would make the play less expensive to stage, but effective dramatic effects do result. Face talks at great length about all the wonders and glories of the lab, using several alchemical malapropisms, which might not be so funny if his language had to compete with alembics and kindling on stage. The gulls or victims of Face's comic rhetoric can talk endlessly of the fantastic riches that Subtle's great heaps of gold shall bring them. Like with Face, these gulls, outrageously greedy in their goals and intentions, have no competition with props. Jonson wants us to laugh at people, not

props, though potentially a wild and crazy lab could be very funny.

Unlike *Comedy*, Johnson's play at once jumps into comic action. The opening scene finds Face and Subtle furiously angry at each other. Jonson's humor is verbal, never more than how his play starts. The two male members of the triumvirate each claim higher glories for himself. Each takes credit for the other's success. They have temporarily, perhaps permanently forgotten, this big house belongs to Master Lovewit, not them. They hurl a lightning-like array of crude scatological insults at each other. They might be nested in a gentleman's house, but they are far from gentlemen. Their gulls will be men who fancy themselves gentlemen, and will be treated with excessive politeness, while their ample pockets are picked right before their eyes.

Comedy, once it gets started, swiftly moves from one mis-recognition to another, till all characters doubt their wits and senses, and only the two sets of twins appearing at the same time near the play's close—why ever did this take so long? — allows the hopelessly befuddled characters a viable chance to start making sense of what happened to them. This leads in a hurried series of short speeches to the happy ending that an audience expects from a Shakespeare comedy.

The Alchemist does have a structure which starts as soon as Doll Common puts a forceful stop to the opening fight between Face and Subtle. Jonson's well-crafted structure requires the triumvirate to remain in the house throughout the play. Johnson divides his work into segments, with each centered on a single gullible long-winded comic character entering the house and asking, almost begging, to be cheated out of whatever coin he might have. The more outrageous the

visitor's greed, the more easily he can be gulled. The triumvirate is wise and witty, with great displays of pseudo-magical language—hence Jonson's dishonest unit is not overly brilliant, not Jacobean Houdinis, and thereby could not cheat a person who was not also dishonest, nor with strong illusions of grandeur. The several gulls might have enough sense to come in out of the rain, but not a great deal more than that.

Jonson's structure allows each gull to hold center stage, with vast outpourings of comic language, while the triumvirate is wise enough to let the gullible gulls—a nice phrase Jonson might have liked—babble on. What matters is each gull gets his chance on stage, delights the audience, to be quickly followed by another. Johnson wisely adds technique to this structure; each gull is a little more outrageous than his predecessor. After each gull has made his appearance—young Dame Pliant being the only female—the gulls leave and depart stage, almost in orderly fashion, if anything about this play can be called orderly. But the format persists; when a gull is on stage, he holds it. Face will almost always be there, and we can joyously expect a wild contortion of facial expressions at each odd statement he hears.

Jonson's structure keeps working till Act Five, when Master Lovewit returns to his house, unexpectedly early of course, and all the characters are brought together in a merry chaos, and we can assume the staging showed bodies stumbling on top of bodies. Jonson did not intend an occult play—we can assume that, for he did not believe in the stuff—but his ending imitates the close of *Comedy*, when Shakespeare's occult forces, seemingly under the play's verbal surface, bring all members and bondsmen of a very large confused family

suddenly back together. All is sweetness and light as Shakespeare closes his comedy.

But not so Jonson—Subtle and Doll decide to flee together, abandoning Face, with all the stolen goods they can carry. Obviously this triumvirate held the same low qualities of loyalty as the ancient Romans. At this moment, Jonson provides a nice touch, a rare moment of genuine sincerity in a play that is so lacking in such moments; Doll and Subtle kiss. This is not the long, drawn-out kiss of Hollywood lovers. Yet Subtle and Doll do like each other. They share a sincere liking and affection. They will soon be leaving the house—as fast as they can get out the doors—but we are glad Jonson has shared this moment with us. Face will return to being Jeremy the butler, lucky to have his head still on his shoulders, and Master Lovewit will be all forgiveness since he will soon take Dame Pliant, lovely, fresh from the country, all of nineteen, to be his bride. The play winds down. A calm exists so Face and Lovewit can face the audience as co-epilogues. If the audience came to laugh and cheer, it will be more than satisfied.

What remains is to look closely at specific passages in *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Alchemist* to discover what verbal games or metaphysical ponderings our authors have done with magical language.

Dapper, a low-level law clerk, is the first visitor to the triumvirate. Face convinces him, with a little effort really, that he is nephew to the Fairy Queene. Dapper has obviously not read Spenserr, or much else. He accepts Dapper can be personally related to a woman in the hierarchy above human. Satire on both Spense, many bad sonnets, and England's late queen—Elizabeth now being dead seven years—are strongly obvious. The more the audience hears, the more it will enjoy.

Near the play's close, Act Five, Scene Four, Dapper will finally get to meet the Fairy Queene, his aunt, who not surprisingly will be played by Doll Common. For this play to work, both Doll and Dame Pliant must be attractive women or characters would not fall so easily to their charms. Lovewit is the foolish older man to fall for the much younger woman, perhaps thirty years, Dame Pliant, and their troubles may commence after the play closes. Yet Dame Pliant must be a "looker," or this part of the story would not work out. Face also admires her person rather hungrily—hence the country girl must appear attractive to the audience. Dapper is a fool, a rather large one, but he would require the Fairy Queene, in the costume of Pixie-land, to be attractive, and so Doll must be. Dapper will not be her first or last admirer.

When nephew and aunt meet, it can be expected Doll will do most of the talking.

DOLL COMMON

Nephew, we thought to have been angry with you;
But that sweet face of yours hath turn'd the tide;
And made it flow with joy, that ebb'd of love.
Arise, and touch our velvet gown.

The Alchemist

Act Five, Scene Four

lines 30-33

She is filled with grandiose promises for her nephew. If she promised him the moon, he might wonder which pocket to take it home in.

DOLL COMMON

Let me now stroke that head.
Much, nephew, shall thou win, much shall thou speed;

Much shalt thou give away; much halt thou lend.

The Alchemist

Act Five, Scene Four

lines 35-37

The value of her promises even increase before the hopelessly smitten Dapper departs.

DOLL COMMON

But come and see me often. I may chance
To leave him three or four hundred chests of treasure,
And some twelve thousand acres of fairy land,
If he game well and comely with good gamesters.

The Alchemist

Act Five, Scene Four

lines 62-65

The next or second visitor to the big house, the sole setting for the play, is Abel Drugger, sometimes called Nab by the triumvirate. He owns a tobacco shop and wants to move into a much larger location, with the obvious desire of making much more money. Drugger is a simple man, though greed-crazed. Why else seek an alchemist? But Drugger's first interests are astrological. He wants Subtle, whom he believes a very wise man, to provide him with the correct astrological learning to set up his new shop with the highest chances of success. We quote this passage in full because it shows Jonson the satirist in dialogue at his best. Obviously the stars cannot tell you on which shelf to put a tobacco pouch, but Drugger thinks it can, and so he talks.

DRUGGER

This, an't please your worship:
I am a young beginner, and am building

Of a new shop, an't like your worship, just
At a corner of a street.—Here's the plot an't—
And I would know by art, sir, of your worship,
Which way I should make my door, by necromancy,
And where my shelves; and which would be for boxes,
And which for pots. I would be glad to thrive, sir;
And I was wish'd to your worship by a gentleman,
One Captain Face, that says you know men's planets,
And their good angels, and their bad.

The Alchemist

Act One, Scene Three

lines 7-17

What adds to the laughter is poor Drugger actually thinks he knows what he's talking about. This will be true of all the gulls and make each gull's individual scenes uncannily funny.

Sir Epicure Mammon and his companion Surly enter the house and dominate the first three scenes of Act Two. According to plan, each successive Jonson gull is more outrageous than his predecessor and holds the stage longer. The audience might not have analyzed this structure, but surely will be feeling it. Mammon is the greediest of believers in alchemy—"be rich" is his oft repeated motto. He plans to bring every metal object he owns, perhaps even his kitchen sink, to Subtle to be transformed into gold. Mammon prepares to be the world's most spectacular citizen. He is much too stupid to wonder why the all-powerful alchemist Subtle does not bring all those glories on himself. Why simply give them away? For a small fraction of what they're worth? Of course the ever talkative Mammon could not talk his way out of a paper bag, but the same does not hold true for his companion Surly.

No stage directions are given for Surly's age, but he would seem to be considerably younger than Mammon, rather like a personal clerk or factotum. What Surly might lack in years, he makes up for in common sense, plain practical wisdom. If Jonson employs his own voice in this play, it is Surly. Only Surly doubts the possibility of alchemy, as well as all related occult forces. He might listen politely to Face or Subtle, but he will never give either a half pence out of his own pocket. He cannot talk Mammon out of his rash costly foolishness, because Mammon talks ceaselessly, set speech after set speech, and he who talks cannot rightly hear.

Mammon shows his full belief in alchemy in rapidly outtalking Surly.

MAMMON

Tis the secret
Of nature naturiz'd 'gainst all infections,
Cures all diseases coming of all causes;
A month's grief in a day, a year's in twelve;
And, of what age soever, in a month,
Past all the doses of your drugging doctors.
I'll undertake, withal, to fright the plague
Out o' the kingdom in three months.

The Alchemist
Act Two, Scene Two
lines 66-73

Mammon luxuriates in the endless wonders all this expected new wealth will bring. Jonson does not suffer fools lightly, and he considers Mammon a ripe representative of all those living nincompoops who believe they can find happiness by turning copper piping into king's gold. For this playwright, satire is all.

MAMMON

I will have all my beds blown up, not stuff'd:
Down is too hard; and then, mine oval room
Fill'd with such pictures as Tiberius took
From Elephantis, and dull Aretine
But coldly imitated. Then, my glasses
Cut in more subtle angles, to disperse
And multiply the figures, as I walk
Naked between my succubae. My mists
I'll have to perfume, vapour'd 'bout the room,
To lose our selves in; and my baths, like pits
To fall into; from whence we will come forth,
And roll us dry in gossamer and roses —
Is it arrived at ruby?—Where I spy
A wealthy citizen, or rich lawyer,
Have a sublim'd pure wife, unto that fellow
I'll send a thousand pound to be my cuckhold.

The Alchemist

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 42-57

If the reader wishes a display of Jonson's satire on alchemical language, none better can be found than Subtle's long, thirty-five line speech to the gaping, believing Mammon. Pressures of space prevent us from quoting this delightful passage, Act Two, Scene Three, lines 150-185.

Mammon and Surly are followed on stage by Ananias, an Anabaptist, not one of Jonson's favorite groups. Anabaptists believed, rather like followers of alchemy, that society could be marvelously and virtuously transformed by deep, pious, interior contemplation. It also helps to do away with good times and dancing. Ananias is obviously a hypocrite, one of many Jonson

sets before us. If Ananias wishes to seek the sacred light within, why seek out an alchemist? Gold filings should not prove too helpful.

But Ananias is but a preparation for the next great scene-stealer, his master, the ultimate Anabaptist hypocrite, the loudly talking Tribulation Wholesome, pastor of his flock. One cannot help but admire the triumvirate in dealing successfully with so many kinds of gulls—they are not specialists. They will part with any fool and his money, and Jonson keeps supplying the fools. Tribulation Wholesome, another name Dickens would be proud of, begins a satire of religious pomposity as soon as he opens his much-practiced mouth. He enters the triumvirite's house, and enjoys the first scene of Act Three alone with Ananias.

TRIBULATION

These tribulations are common to the saints,
And such rebukes we of the separation
Must bear with willing shoulders, as the trials
Send forth to tempt our frailties.

The Alchemist

Act Three, Scene One

lines 1-4

Ananias responds that Subtle is not a good man, “The visible mark of the beast in his forehead. / And for this stone, it is a work of darkness.” The stone is the philosopher’s stone, or elixir of life. Depending on your beliefs, the stone can cure all diseases, provide lasting life on this planet, turn all metallic objects to pure gold, perhaps some silver. Tribulation discounts the silver. He is a gold man through and through. Ananias is making for a solid practical potential; for the practice of alchemy to be successful, the alchemist must be a good man.

Tribulation finds this inconvenient nonsense, though surely he has heard this many times before—it is a basic tenet of alchemy. Tribulation's answer is a comic classic of pompous self-serving religious compromise. Ananias speaks again, "The sanctified cause / should have a sanctified course," lines 15-16. Tribulation's response is thirty lines, and we cannot quote all, though all would stage well and are worth careful pondering. We quote nine funny lines.

TRIBULATION

Not always necessary.
The children of perdition are oft times
Made instruments even of the greatest works.
Besides, we should give somewhat to man's nature,
The place he lives in, still about the fire,
And fume of metals, that intoxicate
The brain of man, and make him prone to passion.
Where have you greater atheists than your cooks
Or more profane, or choleric, than you glass-men?
More anti-Christian than your bell-founders?

The Alchemist

Act Three, Scene One

lines 16-24

The final pair of visitors to the big London house are from the country, a young man named Kastril with a strong chip on his shoulder who wishes to make a celebrated name for himself by beating up people on the London streets, accompanied by his sister, younger, nineteen, Dame Pliant, who does not say much but is very pretty. Other gulls have made return appearances—the house seems running mad with them—but Kastril will follow Jonson's format of being allowed to let his bizarre oddities show, and he does so by becoming the

play's most gullible listener. Others talk. Kastril listens. If he is so foolishly willing, Face is more than glad to do what he does best: con by talking. Face does this by falling head-over-heels attracted to Dame Pliant, another Dickensian name. If Kastril desires victory in street brawls, Face proclaims the wise Dr. Subtle has just the machine for him. Again, all Subtle's apparatus are off stage, so we can only imagine.

FACE

Sir, for the duello,
The doctor, I assure you, shall inform you,
To the least shadow of a hair; and show you
An instrument he has of his own making,
Wherewith, no sooner shall you make report
Of any quarrel, but he will take the height on't
Most instantly, and tell in what degree
Of safety it lies in, or mortality.
And how it may be borne, whether in a right line,
Or a half circle; or may else be cast
Into an angle blunt, if not acute:
All this he will demonstrate, and then, rules
To give and take the lie by.

The Alchemist

Act Three, Scene Four

lines 26-38

If Kastril wanted to tap-dance on the moon, the ever-fertile thinking of Face would be quick to think of a way, which might not convince the audience but would surely convince Kastril.

Subtle also likes to have special fun with witty tongue-twisting language. Our example occurs at the close of Scene Three in Act Four. Surly is disguised as a Spaniard, but soon fears he is the one being tricked. He is the play's wisest

character, but Subtle's wonderful response leaves him speechless. Bathada is Spanish for beard, which Surly has sworn by. Face's other Spanish-sounding words are untranslatable rhymes.

SUBTLE

How, issue on? Yes, praesto, senor. Please you
Enthratha the chambratha, worthy Don,
Where if you please the fates, in your bathada,
You shall be soak'd, and stok's, and tubb's, and rubb'd,
And scrubb'd, and fubb'd, dear Don, before you go.
You shall in faith, my scurvy baboon Don,
Be curried, claw'd, and flaw'd, and taw'd, indeed.
I will the heartilier go about it now,
And make the widow a punk so much the sooner,
To be reveng'd on this impetuous Fate:
The quickly doing of it is the grave.

The Alchemist

Act Four, Scene Three

lines 99-109

The finest, extended comic scene in the play occurs in Scene One of Act Four, when Sir Epicure Mammon mistakes Doll Common, always fetching, for a distinguished lady of quality. He courts her, without the slightest notion she is a prostitute in fine dress. High comedy results. He promises her the fabulous riches he shall soon obtain from Dr. Subtle's alchemy. He is the most glorious of fools.

Jonson's numerous gulls do not attain a shred of wisdom about themselves. The sharpest sting of satire does not allow that. Mammon will soon be looking for his next false alchemist, and Tribulation will soon be attempting another swift way of bringing heaven to earth, with minimal effort. Kastril, win or

lose, will surely find young men to brawl with. Our two sweethearts, Doll and Subtle, will set up shop elsewhere, though with far less space to move around. Lovewit has a new young wife. Only Face is right back where he started, clean-shaven, back to work as Jeremy the butler.

We now move to specific passages in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* that convey magical concepts and beliefs. The befuddled characters in this play do trust in magic, and often look to magic as explanation for the unprecedented baffling events that surround them.

Antipholus of Syracuse is spending his first day in Ephesus. Act One is only in its second scene when his bafflement begins. Dromio of Ephesus has just told him all about a local wife, and has no knowledge of money his master has just given him. Antipholus of course mistakes this polite messenger for his own bondsman Dromio of Syracuse—notice how wonderfully confusing it gets just recounting this story—and speaks ten lines about dark magic forces in Ephesus.

ANTIPHOLUS OF SYRACUSE

Upon my life, by some device or other
The villain is o'er-raught of all my money.
They say this town is full of cozenage,
As nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,
Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind,
Soul-killing witches that deform the body,
Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks,
And many suchlike libertines of sin.
If it prove so, I will be gone the sooner.

I'll go to the Centaur to go seek this slave.
I greatly fear my money is not safe.

The Comedy of Errors
Act One, Scene Two
lines 95-105

This speaker expects the worst of his new city, and for a short time, he shall find it.

We mention time because *Comedy* is the rare play where Shakespeare followed the long-held classical unities of drama: one continuous unfolding plot to take place within a single day at the same place. The same adherence to the classical unities is upheld in Jonson's *The Alchemist*. In both plays, the plot will continue unfolding until the disguises or misrepresentations are finally cast aside and a semblance of truth is revealed.

Luciana, the sister of the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, is given the finest Neo-Platonic passage in the play. Her sister Adriana is disturbed at her husband's unfeeling lateness at attending their dinner together. Luciana responds by discussing the hierarchy of being, with a nod toward opening Genesis. A feminist today would find her speech strongly tinged with male chauvinism, especially unfortunate since the speaker is an articulate woman of high intelligence. Luciana reveals the human's three parts, as discussed by Ficino when interpreting Plato and translating the Neo-Platonists. Each human has an intellectual sense of spirit, which connects the immortal soul to the body. Man is "divine," says Luciana. But the soul alone cannot willingly reach out to the divine without the spirit. Ficino states the spirit connects the beauty of harmonious music to the soul, thereby letting the body thrill with enjoyment. This same process occurs with the greatest poetry and art. Shakespeare's audience would bring much more to the table for

Luciana's speech than we do. She captures so much in her eleven lines.

LUCIANA

Why, headstrong liberty is lashed with woe.
There's nothing situate under heaven's eye
But hath his bound in earth, in sea, in sky.
The beasts, the fishes, and the winged fowls
Are their males' subjects and at their controls.
Man, more divine, the master of all these,
Lord of the wide world and wild wat'ry seas,
Indued with intellectual sense and souls,
Of more pre-eminence than fish and fowls,
Are masters to their females, and their lords.
Then let you will attend on their accords.

The Comedy of Errors

Act Two, Scene One

lines 15-25

Adriana, the one listener on stage to this speech, is not impressed. She promptly remarks, "This servitude makes you to keep unwed," line 26. Hence only one sister reads philosophy, perhaps only one character in the play. The sisters proceed to debate marriage as sisters will.

We note a brief passage in the same scene because of our reader's possible interest in contemporary sports. Yet another confusion of identity causes Adriana, good wife, not a philosopher, to beat Dromio of Ephesus, who compares himself—quite aptly—to a leather football.

DROMIO OF EPHESUS

And I so round with you as you with me,
That like a football you do spurn me thus?
You spurn me hence, and he will spurn me hither.
If I last in this service, you must case me in leather.

The Comedy of Errors

Act Two, Scene One

lines 81-84

Our human football leaves the stage in a big hurry after uttering these lines. His image is not magical, but curious.

Both visitors from Syracuse get a chance to explore supernal explanations for their strange day in Ephesus. Shakespeare wants to keep his options open—the unknowing audience needs to be tantalized—and he lets Dromio explore pixie-land and Antipholus mutter in some fear about the life to come.

DROMIO OF SYRACUSE (aside)

O, for my beads! I cross me for a sinner.
This is the fairyland. O spite of spites,
We talk of goblins, oafs, and sprites.
If we obey them not, this will ensue;
They'll suck our breath or pinch us black and blue.

The Comedy of Errors

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 191-195

ANTIPHOLUS OF SYRACUSE (aside)

Am I in earth, in heaven, or in hell?
Sleeping or waking? Mad or well advised?
Known unto these, and to myself disguised!

I'll say as they say, and persever so,
And in this mist at all adventures go.

The Comedy of Errors

Act Two, Scene Two

lines 215-219

Later in the play, Act Three, Scene Two, both men will contemplate witchcraft as the source of their ceaseless problems. Dromio has been romantically assaulted by Nell, the severely overweight love interest of the other Dromio, the one who lives here in Ephesus permanently. He responds in a nervous, energetic prose.

DROMIO OF SYRACUSE

O, Sir, I did not look so low. To
conclude, this drudge or diviner laid
claim to me, called me Dromio, swore
I was assured to her, told me
what pretty marks I had about me —
as the mark of my shoulder, the
mole in my neck, the great wart on
my left arm—that I, amazed, ran
from her as a witch. And I think if
my breast had not been made of
faith, and my heart of steel, she had
transformed me to a curtail dog,
and made me turn i' th' wheel.

The Comedy of Errors

Act Three, Scene Two

lines 144-152

This Dromio has more to say: he would flee from this huge woman as from a bear, lines 160-161. When he exits, his master

promptly agrees, “There’s none but witches do inhabit here,” line 163.

At the start of Scene Three in Act Four, this same Antipholus will continue this theme, “Lapland sorcerers inhabit here,” line 11. Thirty lines later, this visiting Antipholus will seek help from a higher power “And here we wander in illusions / Some blessed power deliver us from hence.” A nameless courtesan suddenly approaches our two men from Syracuse. (We keep wanting to honor Rodgers and Hart by recalling *The Boys from Syracuse*.) Our men feel spiritual help might be required. For all the robust slapstick comedy in this play, the spiritual is never far behind. Dromio worries the courtesan, nicely attractive, is the “devil’s dam.” He momentarily turns theologian, “It is written they appear to men like angels of light,” from prose paragraph, lines 51-57. Antipholus takes his turn at calling the pour courtesan “a sorceress,” line 66.

We need backtrack a scene to hear Dromio of Syracuse spouting his finest language of satanic insult. Antipholus of Ephesus has been arrested and Dromio of Syracuse, deeply baffled, still unaware of the twins situation, hurries to tell Adriana, true wife of the arrested. Of course Dromio does not know that—how could he—but rants against those responsible for the indignities hurled at his one true master. Confusing, right? Shakespeare would not have it any other way. Hear Dromio:

DROMIO OF SYRACUSE

No, he’s in Tartar limbo, worse than hell.
A devil in an everlasting garment hath him,
One whose hard heart is buttoned up with steel;
A fiend, a fairy, pitiless and rough;

A wolf, nay worse, a fellow all in boff;
A back-friend, a shoulder-clapper, one that
countermands
The passages of alleys, creeks, and narrow launds;
A hound that runs counter, and yet draws dryfoot well;
One that before the judgement carries poor souls to hell.

The Comedy of Errors

Act Four, Scene Two

lines 32-40

If Adriana is confused, Dromio deepens her bafflement by claiming to turn time backward. Shakespeare frequently showed a strong interest in various aspects of time, as in *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, the sonnets. Dromio starts by teasing Adriana about his seemingly magical ability to set time back an hour—he still cannot be quite sure exactly who she is. Then Dromio combines wit and philosophy, and again Adriana is forced to listen to language she cannot quite understand.

DROMIO OF SYRACUSE

Time is very bankrupt, and owes more than he's worth
to season.

Nay, he's a thief too. Have you not heard men say
That time comes stealing on by night and day?
If a be in debt and theft, and a sergeant in the way,
Hath he not reason to turn back an hour in a day?

The Comedy of Errors

Act Four, Scene Two

lines 57-61

Adriana is relieved to see her sister Luciana enter with the money to redeem her husband. Then she utters her weariness at all Dromio of Syracuse has told her as the scene closes, “Come, sister, I am pressed down with conceit; /Conceit, my comfort

and my injury," lines 64-65. Our reader need take note that conceit is a common synonym meaning metaphor. Poor Adriana, not having her best day, has had all the metaphor she can handle.

The two sisters will determine the only Antipholus they know has gone mad, and therefore in all likelihood is possessed by the devil. This prompts them to call in the conjurer or exorcist Dr. Pinch, another wonderful Dickensian name and the play's finest comic character. Dr. Pinch is so pompous, with such high illusions of grandeur, that he might very well have stepped out of *The Alchemist*. Pinch begins his treatment by taking the pulse of Antipholus of Ephesus. This requires grabbing the patient's hand. The husband, growing outraged at wife and sister-in-law, promptly strikes the good doctor. Pinch, never at a loss for words, proclaims his diagnosis, based on a single punch, bounding with confidence.

PINCH

I charge thee, Satan, housed within this man.
To yield possession to my holy prayers,
And to thy state of darkness hie thee straight:
I conjure thee by all the saints in heaven.

The Comedy of Errors

Act Four, Scene Four

lines 55-58

Pinch, not surprisingly, has very little success with his methods. By proclaiming Dromio of Ephesus also mad, the doctor now has two men furious at him. He orders them bound for their own safety, but of course they escape. This allows Antipholus a long angry description of Pinch, Act Five, Scene One, lines 247-254. This passage is too long to quote and contains no magic, but does show the verbal virtuosity of justified anger.

The play's other healer is the Abbess, obviously a devout Christian who might have glanced at alchemical tracts or Paracelsus. Her patient is Antipholus of Syracuse, who with his correct bondsman has sought sanctuary inside her priory. The Abbess' healing method is brief, common for Shakespeare's genuine healers, and requires only two lines, "With wholesome syrups, drugs, and holy prayer / To make him a formal man again," Act Five, Scene One, lines 105-106. The Abbess will soon be revealed as the long lost wife of Egeon, who will not only keep his head on his shoulders at the close of this long eventful day, but will see his entire family united after three decades. Mercifully he does little talking at the play's happy close. He is the forerunner of Pericles and Cymbeline—all good things come to those who wait, though in Shakespeare the waiting surely seems excessive.

The Comedy of Errors is not an openly alchemical play, and yet the image of gold appears many times. Shakespeare's frequent use of gold might provide an underlying magical current that all will turn out well. Let us list the several appearances of gold to confirm our point; Act One, Scene one, lines 58-67; Act one, Scene One, line 109; Act One, Scene Two, line 8; Act Two, Scene One, line 9; Act Three, Scene One, line 48; Act Three, Scene Two, line 189; Act Four, Scene One, line 29; Act Four, Scene Four, line 97; Act Four, Scene Four, line 154.

We might have gilded the lily with all these statistics, but Shakespeare clearly had gold—and so much else—in mind when he wrote *Comedy*. If we exclude Egeon's opening speech, Shakespeare never wrote a better constructed comedy. *Comedy* is not only the forerunner in time to *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, but it can proudly stand on its tip-toes beside them.

Chapter Fifty-nine:

Isaac Newton and the Emerald Tablet—Looking Forward

This is the close of our first volume of Ficino's long and pervasive influence on English Elizabethan literature. Our second volume will discuss Sidney, Spenser, Donne, Marvell, Herbert, and Milton. All these writers paid more than passing notice to the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus. We want to conclude this volume with a forward looking quote, and Isaac Newton proves most useful. Newton spent thirty years practicing alchemy. He read the Emerald Tablet with scrupulous care and wrote a long, seemingly endless commentary. We will close by quoting a partial section, a looking forward, a Newton few people have gotten to know.

The things that follow are most true. Inferior and superior, fixed and volatile, sulfur and quicksilver have a similar nature and are one thing, like man and wife. For they differ one from another only by the degree of digestion and maturity. Sulfur is mature quicksilver, and quicksilver is immature sulfur; and on account of this affinity they unite like male and female, and

they act on each other, and through that action they are mutually transmuted into each other and procreate a more noble offspring to accomplish the miracles of this one thing. And just as all things were created from one Chaos by the design of one God, so in our art all things, that is the four elements, are born from this one thing, which is our Chaos, by the design of the Artificer and the skillful adaptation of things. And this generation is similar to the human, truly from a father and mother, which are the Sun and Moon. And when the Infant is conceived through the coition of these, he is borne continuously in the belly of the wind until the hour of birth, and after birth he is nourished at the breasts of foliated Earth until he grows up. This wind is the bath of the Sun and the Moon, and Mercurius, and the Dragon, and the Fire that succeeds in the third place as the governor of the work; and the earth is the nurse of Diana and Apollo, that is, the white and red tinctures. This is the source of all the perfection of the whole world.

(This quote is taken from *The Alchemy Reader*, edited by Stanton J. Linden, Cambridge U. Press, 2003, pp. 246-247.)

Bibliography
Section One
The Ancient World

Angus S. *The Mystery Religions*. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1975. First published in 1925.

Dover Books once again brings back to life a long-ago scholarly work. Angus covers a wide area, the rise and spread of various religious beliefs in the ancient world, ending with the triumph of Christianity. His sections on Orphism and astrology provide a good background for Ficino.

Artus. *Phaenomena*. Translated by G. R. Mair. Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library. First published 1921.

The translation was first published in 1921. Aratus is a writer from the ancient world, an important forerunner of the Quattrocento skywatchers in Florence. Aratus is a poet, but Mair gives a prose translation, the only one in print. Aratus gives advice about weather forecasting that might still be useful in rural areas today.

Bieman, Elizabeth. *Plato Baptized: Towards the Interpretations of Spenser's Mimetic Fictions*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo, London, 1988.

Bieman expertly connects Plato and Spenser, with special focus on the latter's "The Fowre Hymnes." Bieman's opening 150 pages present a history of magic and mysticism, an excellent self-contained work.

Boethius. *The Consolations of Philosophy*. Translated and introduced by V. E. Watts. The Folio Society, London, 1998.

This author devotes a chapter to Boethius' major work of Neo-Platonism. If Boethius was a Christian, it does not show in this work. The prose dialogue is accompanied by thirty-one lyric poems.

Cuomo, S. *Ancient Mathematics*. Routledge, London and New York, 2001.

Plato and Pythagoras are both major figures in Renaissance magic, and both were expert mathematicians. Their expertise is a commingling of truth and legend. But we do need to know what kind of math it was possible for them to study and master, and hence the usefulness of Cuomo's book. She writes clearly and vividly about Euclid and Archimedes. She also discusses how math related to a new religion called Christianity.

Evans, James. *The History and Practice of Ancient Astronomy*. Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1998.

If you want to live in the ancient world and stare nightly at the stars, this book shall do it for you. Many studies of ancient math involved. Ample illustrations.

Fuller, B. A. G. *History of Greek Philosophy: Thales to Democritus*. Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1923.

This would not be an easy book to locate, but well worth the find. Fuller covers, in vivid detail, the philosophers before Plato, and they are well worth the study. The book is nine decades old, but these philosophers have not changed. Fuller could have made a fine novelist or journalist. He writes well.

Golden Verses of Pythagoras. Translated with commentary by Fabre D'Olivet. Samuel Weiser, Inc., New York, 1975. First published in 1813.

Pythagoras is always a central figure in the history of magic. D'Olivet provides 164 pages of commentary. He survived the French Revolution, Napoleon, and yet retains his connection with Pythagoras. His value is a knowledge of many philosophers, from all periods, which he can apply in various creative ways to the Golden Verses.

The Golden Verses of Pythagoras. With the commentary of Hierocles. Adapted from the translation of N. Rowe. Concord Grove Press, Santa Barbara, CA, 1983.

Hierocles wrote his commentary between 415 and 450 A.D. His intent is to provide practical advice, to enable his reader to better get through his day-to-day affairs. He believes in the purification and perfection of human nature. He sets high goals, not as high as Pythagoras, but high.

Graf, Fritz. *Magic in the Ancient World.* Translated by Franklin Philip. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, London, 1997.

This work provides necessary background material for the student of Renaissance magic. Graf starts in the sixth century B.C.E. and moves through late antiquity. Rituals are emphasized, which provide a foundation for Iamblichus, the major Neo-Platonist.

Guthrie, W. K. C. *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement*. W. W. Norton & Co., Inc. New York, 1966.

Ficino felt a close connection to the Orphic movement. He attempted to sing in the manner of Orpheus himself with lyre accompaniment. Hence Guthrie's fine book is especially useful. He sifts his evidence very carefully. He no doubt knows far more than Ficino possibly could have.

Iamblicus. *Life of Pythagoras*. Translated from Greek by Thomas Taylor. Inner Traditions International, Rochester, Vermont, 1986. First edition 1818.

1818 is not a misprint. Thomas Taylor was the major Greek scholar of the English Romantic Age, and a close friend of William Blake. Back to Iamblichus, who did after all write this biography. Hagiography might be a better word. Unproven facts and legends are blended. No fact about Pythagoras can be conclusively proven, but you would never know that from reading Iamblicus. You will learn Pythagoras had a golden thigh, then decide to believe.

Julianus. *The Chaldaean Oracles*. Translated from Latin into English by Thomas Stanley in 1701. Heptangle Books, Gillette, NJ, 1989.

Serious scholars should make regular on-line searches for Heptangle Books and other excellent small presses. Gems will be found. Heptangle is a very small press, but this volume of *The Chaldaean Oracles* is a model of scholarship. A Latin translation by Francisco Patrizzi is provided. Essays show how the *Oracles* connect with

Ficino and Pico. Stanley's translation is true mystic poetry. Medieval and Renaissance commentaries are most interesting.

Laertius, Diogenes. *Lives of the Philosophers*. Translated and edited by A. Robert Caponigri. Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1968.

Diogenes Laertius lived during the first three decades of the third century. He wrote about the lives of the most significant western philosophers in the B.C. era. He never lived to see the Neo-Platonists. His work has had a long and honored history. He became a minor classic while writing about major classics.

Macrobius. *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. Translated from Latin by William Harris Stahl. Columbia University Press, New York, 1990. This edition first published in 1952.

Macrobius was widely read throughout the middle ages and early Renaissance, when he was considered a major philosopher. Cicero writes a short work of fiction: young Scipio has a dream of his father and grandfather. This dream is the source of Macrobius' very long commentary, which takes in the entire cosmos, the zodiac, the music of the spheres, Plato, the senselessness of fame. Cicero would have been more than a little surprised.

Manilius. *Astronomica*. Edited and translated by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, London, 1977.

Manilius lived in the early Christian era, a contemporary of the emperor Augustus. Manilius wrote a long Latin poem in five books called *Astronomica*. His subject is astrology, first, last, and always. No writer believed more deeply and fully in astrology. Manilius provided a complete study. His verse can rise to heights of eloquence when he described individual stars or signs of the zodiac.

Marinus of Samaria. *The Life of Proclus or Concerning Happiness*. Translated by Kenneth S. Guthrie. Phanes Press, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1986.

Phanes Press, truly a small press, has the useful habit of publishing valuable texts that no one else would look at twice. Scholars must always bow their head in thanks to good small presses. We can now be fairly certain Proclus believed in theurgy. We are also provided several performance hymns by Proclus. Simon and Schuster missed something valuable, and not for the first time.

McClain, Ernest G. *The Pythagorean Plato*. Nicholas-Hays, Inc., New Beach, Maine, 1978.

The small press again provides a welcome title. McClain has written a book for mathematicians with a strong interest in Plato. This might not have included Ficino, but Copernicus would surely have welcomed this volume. The chapters are meant to be studied, not simply read through.

Meyer, Marvin, editor. *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1999.

If scholars wonder what theurgy was like in the ancient world, this volume provides many fine examples. Occasionally good poetry results. Of course neither Iamblichus nor Ficino ever saw these works, but they might be typical of what these masters thought theurgy might be or ought to be. If not, it is still a fine volume.

Moore, Clifford Herschel. *Ancient Beliefs in the Immortality of the Soul*. Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., New York, 1963.

A short book that provides useful background from the ancient world that Ficino would have frequently pondered before his numerous writings on the soul. No subject was more important to Ficino.

Ogden, Daniel, editor. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2002.

Daniel Ogden has collected fourteen original texts from the ancient world about the subject matter in his title. He has chosen wisely and well. Full texts are given, rather than mere snippets. A rich background source.

Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Revised by C. D. Reeve. Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1992. First published by Grube alone in 1974. Reeve's revised edition in 1992.

This translation of Plato's only book-length work enters our bibliography because of the high acclaim accorded the two translators. Many scholars of ancient Greek believe this translation comes closest to Plato's original tone, style, temperament than previous efforts.

Plato. *Symposium*. Translated with an introduction by Benjamin Jowett. Digireads.comPublishing, Stilwell, KS, 2005.

Jowett was a Victorian, but his introduction remains excellent, well worth pursuing.

Plato. *Timaeus*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. The Echo Library, Middlesex, 2006.

Jowett might have lived in the nineteenth century, but he remains our finest translator of Plato. A solid knowledge of *Timaeus* is essential for approaching both medieval and Renaissance cosmology.

Plotinus. *The Essential Plotinus: Representative Treatises from the Enneads*. Selected and Translated by Elmer O'Brien, S. J. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., Indianapolis, IN, 1964.

Father O'Brien divides Plotinus' work by category. His method is effective and his translations are smooth and clear.

Proclus the Neo-Platonic Philosopher. *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence and a Solution of Those Doubts and On the Subsistence of Evil*. Translated from Latin by Thomas Taylor in 1833. Ares Publishing, Inc., Chicago, 1980.

Proclus is the only Neo-Platonist who does not write well. The others compose a beautiful prose poetry. Proclus writes long, unwieldy, out of control, hard to follow sentences. Thomas Taylor is a fine translator; with a lesser talent, Proclus might not be readable. Why read Proclus? Ficino took him very seriously. That sadly is our only answer. Ficino had the patience of a saint.

Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*. Translated by Colm Luibheid. Paolist Press, New York Mahwah, NJ, 1987.

Readers throughout the middle ages and Renaissance believed this Dionysius on the title page was a companion of St. Paul. Later scholarship proved this Dionysius lived during the fifth or sixth century—hence the new pseudonym Pseudo-Dionysius. His works are the primary source for belief in the angelic hierarchy, a subject he truly created. Milton would have been lost without him. Pseudo-Dionysius also writes beautiful poetic prose about the unique sacredness of divine names.

Shaw, Gregory. *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neo-Platonism of Iamblichus*. Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, 1995.

Something special happens in this scholarly work. Shaw writes the finest work ever on Iamblichus. Nobody can say they have truly studied Iamblicus without reading Shaw. The scholarship is full and complete. In addition,

Shaw writes in the style of a fourth-century Neo-Platonist. This is most unexpected and yet most winning. It is almost as if Plotinus submitted a manuscript to Penn State. Doubt this critique? Then read Shaw.

Sutton, David. *Platonic and Archimedean Solids*. Walker & Company, New York, 2002.

Scholars read about geometric solids from ancient Greece, but Sutton has both written and illustrated a thin, short book that brings all these multi-varied solids into clear view. They are much easier to look at than write about. Kepler knew them by heart and based his early astronomy on them. Plato wrote on the entrance gate to his academy: Know Geometry or Do Not Enter Here.

Wallis, Richard T., editor. *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*. State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992.

This anthology contains twenty-three essays spread out over 500 pages. The reader needs a solid knowledge of these matters before entering in. This is academic writing, the good and bad of it, much useful thinking and information, show and painstaking to read.

Section Two

Ficino and His Age

Allen, Michael J. B. *Nuptial Arithmetic*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1994.

Allen is by far our finest Ficino scholar. This volume is devoted to the most refined and subtle nuances of Ficino's thought. The subtitle is essential: Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on the Fatal Number in Book VIII of Plato's *Republic*. We learn Ficino's interest in fatal and nuptial numbers, followed by his ideas on eugenics, daemons, astrology and prophecy, the instauration of a golden age—all this from a single number.

Copenhaver, Brian P., translator and editor. *Corpus Hermeticum* (Greek) and *Asclepius* (Latin). Cambridge University Press, 1992.

The finest English translation to date of the two Hermetic works that began Ficino's fame in 1464. To understand both Ficino and Renaissance magic, we must know these two works thoroughly. Copenhaver's single volume can make this happen.

Ficino, Marsilio. *Commentaries on Plato: Phaedrus and Ion*. Edited and translated by Michael J. B. Allen. The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 2008.

The latest volume in Allen's superb, monumental effort to provide Latin-English volumes of Ficino's major works. Allen is rapidly becoming the Ficino of the twenty-first century.

Ficino, Marsilio. *Meditations on the Soul: Selected Letters of Marsilio Ficino*. Inner Traditions International, Rochester, Vermont, 1996.

This edition is still in print and well worth getting. Ficino's best writings are his letters. However much we admire his other works, Ficino is at his best in his letters, which were always intended for publication and thereby public works.

Ficino, Marsilio. *Platonic Theology*. Six Volumes. English translation by Michael J. B. Allen. Latin text edited by James Harkins, with William Bowen. 2001-2006. The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 2001-2006.

In six volumes, Ficino's longest work is available in a Latin-English text. This monumental scholarly achievement is user friendly, attractively done, masterfully edited. Allen translates with a beautiful, steady, poetic flow.

Ficino, Marsilio. *Selected Writings*. Edited and introduced by Angela Voss. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA 2006.

This volume contains a generous portion of Ficino's primary astrological work, "On Obtaining Life From the Heavens." This work is often written about but rarely actually found in print.

Hermetica: The Writings Attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.

Edited and translated by Walter Scott. SOLOS Press,
Great Britain, 1992. First published in 1924.

Water Scott—no connection to the author of *Ivanhoe*—
has the longest-lasting translation of Thrice-Great
Hermes. His translation is clear, vivid, moving, poetic,
pious—it should always be in print somewhere. If a
Renaissance scholar does not own it, he should hunt it
down.

Walker, D. P. *Spiritual & Demonic Magic from Ficino to
Campanella*. Pennsylvania State University Press,
University Park, PA, 2000. First published by the
Warburg Institute in London in 1958.

Walker produced the first great trailblazer in the study of
Renaissance magic. He covers in intelligent detail
fifteen decades of magus figures. He has mastered all
the primary sources and written knowingly about them.
All subsequent scholars of Renaissance magic are
beholden to him.

Section Three

Primary Texts of Renaissance Magic

Agrippa, Cornelius. *The Occult Philosophy*. E. J. Brill, Leiden, New York, Köln, 1992.

The complete text in Latin, as Agrippa wrote. V. Perrone Compagni provides a useful fifty-page introduction in English to Agrippa, with important biographical facts.

Agrippa, Cornelius. *Occult Philosophy: Natural Magic*. Edited by Willis F. Whitehead. Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, NY, 2006. First published in 1531.

Dover Books has again produced another useful volume. Agrippa wrote the most popular and often respected text on magic in the sixteenth century. The original text appeared in three volumes from 1531 to 1533. Renaissance readers ploughed through cover to cover to cover. Dover has provided an abridged version, but the only one available in English.

Bentley, Eric, editor. *The Genius of the Italian Theater*. A Mentor Book, The New American Library, New York, 1964.

An Anthology of seven Italian plays from the Renaissance. Our special interest is the long play by Giordano Bruno titled, "The Candle Bearer."

Boehme, Jacob. *Selected Works*. Edited by Robin Waterfield. North Atlantic Books. Berkeley, CA, 2001.

In the last quarter of the sixteenth century, Jacob Boehme was a gifted shoemaker who turned to Christian mysticism. He became a much better mystical writer than he was a shoemaker. He writes on the great subjects: God and Creation, Man and Nature. He is not easy to read for each word appears carved deeply in wood. He is an important figure in a history of Renaissance spirituality who does not stay on the familiar and beaten track.

Bruno, Giordano. *The Cabala of Pegasus*. Translated and annotated by Sidney L. Sondergard and Madison U. Sowell. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002.

Bruno takes us on a wild, rollicking, satirical ride in this dialogue, which much later would influence James Joyce. Pegasus, the spirit of verse, debates the ass, the vehicle of divine revelation. Irreverence begins with the cast of characters. The two voices debate Pythagorean metempsychosis, divine authority, secular learning. The Cabala underlies all, which is another way of saying our cosmos is magic.

Dee, John. *Essential Readings*. Selected and Introduced by Gerald Suster. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA, 2003.

This slim volume contains 113 pages of Dee's varied writings. His Preface to Euclid is included, so modern readers can ascertain how much of a mathematician he truly was. He falls far short of the major figures of his

era. Thirty pages of his Spiritual Diaries show his other side—his several occult sides made him the most famous magus in Elizabeth's England.

Dee, John. *Propaeudemata Aphoristica* (1558 and 1568). Edited and translated from Latin by Wayne Shumaker. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angles, London, 1978.

Dee composed 120 aphorisms on astronomy and related topics. These aphorisms are short pieces, but require slow careful reading. Dee is not an easy writer. This volume includes an introductory essay by J. L. Heilbron on Dee's mathematics and physics and his place in the scientific revolution. The Latin version of the aphorisms is also provided.

D'Espagnet, Jean. *The Summary of Physics Restored*. Edited by Thomas Willard. Garland Publishing Inc., New York and London, 1999. First edition in 1651.

Garland Publishing does an excellent job of providing original alchemical texts—this one from 1651—with solid editing. Jean D'Espagnet is also known as John of Spain. He restores physics by describing in detail the alchemical process. He is a true practitioner. He is a writer not afraid to get his hands dirty. This is slow reading, but alchemy was a slow process.

Fludd, Robert. *Selected Writings*. Edited by William Huffman. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA, 2001.

Fludd is an essential figure in the Renaissance belief system of microcosm-macrocosm. Generous selections of Fludd's writing on this matter are provided. When Fludd actually published in the first half of the seventeenth century, his books were huge, a requirement to handle the gigantic, complex occult illustrations he created. A full study of Fludd requires looking a long time at those pictures.

The Golden Asse of Apuleius. Done into English by William Adlington in 1566. Michael Kennerley, New York, 1908.

This is a rare book but the Adlington translation enjoyed immense popularity in Shakespeare's England. Apuleius is a Latin writer from the ancient world, and *The Golden Asse* is a picaresque novel filled with magic, a rough, bawdy, rollicking magic. Isis is the supreme goddess of this magic. Elizabethans would always be interested in magic with an Egyptian bond.

Horapollo, the Hieroglyphics of. Translated and introduced by George Boas. Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XIII, Princeton, NJ, 1993. First published in 1950.

Princeton has provided an edition of a text famous throughout the Renaissance. Those readers believed in the magical powers of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics which they had not a clue of translating. The volume includes several wonderful illustrations by Dürer.

Kibre, Pearl. *The Library of Pico Della Mirandola*. AMS Press, New York, 1966.

This useful, interesting book is a complete descriptive inventory of Pico's private, personal library. Pico was born into money, an aristocrat, and he spent his money quite well. Pico read several languages—more than anyone of his era—and so his library has books in several languages. He never had a day job. Perhaps he did read them all.

Lyle, Jane. *The Renaissance Tarot*. Cards illustrated by Helen Jones. A Fireside Book, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1998.

Learn all you need to know about Renaissance Tarot in a single, modest-priced, attractive book. Ficino never wrote about Tarot—maybe he didn't know—but a deck spread out on a table would have interested him.

Mates, Julian, and Cantelupe, Eugene. *Renaissance Culture: A New Sense of Order*. George Braziller, New York, 1966.

A rich anthology of Renaissance writing. Our use was Ficino's complete commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, not an easy work to find and essential in understanding of Ficino. This commentary would strongly influence Elizabethan sonneteers, who are generously quoted in this anthology.

Nicholas of Cusa. *Selected Spiritual Writings*. Translated from Latin and introduced by H. Laurence Bond. Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 1997.

This major, late medieval philosopher is most commonly known as plain Cusa. He was an important influence on Ficino, who had translated Thrice-Great Hermes by 1464, the year Cusa died. Cusa taught a doctrine of Learned Ignorance: the more one knows, especially about spiritual matters, the more the person realizes his ignorance. This does not prevent a person from a rich, full life of contemplative prayer, but every word of those prayers must be grounded in humility.

Paracelsus. *The Archidoxes of Magic*. Samuel Weiser, New York, 1975. First English edition in 1656.

This is a brief handbook on Renaissance magic with the famous name Paracelsus on the title page. It was common for Paracelsus' name to appear on the title pages of books he did not write, and this is very likely one of them. Paracelsus was a groundbreaking author, and this slim volume talks only about the basics: the signs of the zodiac, the seven metals, celestial medicines. Paracelsus would use this as a teaching tool and yes, a very good one.

Paracelsus. *Essential Readings*. Selected and translated by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA, 1999.

Paracelsus is a major, highly influential figure of Renaissance magic and medicine, and this volume provides 200 pages of his original writings. The book is divided into the areas that Paracelsus showed an

expertise on: Medicine, Philosophy, Religion and Politics, Pansophy, Magic and Cabbala.

Roob, Alexander. *The Hermetic Museum: Alchemy and Mysticism*. Taschen, London, New York, Paris, Tokyo, 1997.

An amazing 700-page collection of alchemical and mystical art. Reproductions are superbly accurate, in black and white with many in color. Expert descriptions of each work. Modestly-priced. No serious student of alchemy should be without this.

Weyer, Johann. *On Witchcraft*. An abridged translation by John Shea. Pegasus Press, University of North Carolina Press at Ashville, NC, 1998.

Shea's translation from Latin comes from Weyer's sixth and final edition of *On Witchcraft* published in 1583. Weyer lived five more years, working to translate his Latin into German. He had written a very popular book. He published his first draft in 1563, when the witch craze was approaching its height. Weyer understood the complexity of witchcraft, and sought explications in law, theology, medicine, philosophy.

White, T. H., editor and translator. *The Book of Beasts*. Dover Publications, Inc., New York. First published in 1984.

A remarkable book. T. H. White has put together an authentic twelfth century Latin bestiary, matching text and illustrations. A student of Renaissance emblem books will find a close similarity. White provides a wide range of useful footnotes.

Section Four

Alchemy

Abraham, Lyndy. *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*.
Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Abraham has provided an indispensable book for students of alchemy and Renaissance magic. The book is rich in illustrations and literary quotes. Cross-referencing is made especially easy.

Brock, William H. *The Chemical Tree: A History of Chemistry*.
W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London,
2000. First edition in 1992.

The opening chapter, forty pages long, is an excellent introduction to alchemy, with areas of alchemy not often discussed: Greek, Chinese, Arabic. The second chapter deals with Paracelsus and Helmont, and the transition of alchemy to chemistry in the person of Robert Boyle. This is a 650-page book, with the remaining fourteen chapters about the development of chemistry as a serious science.

Burckhardt, Titus. *Alchemy*. Translated from the German by
William Stoddart. Penguin Books, Inc., Baltimore, MD,
1974. First published in 1960 by Walter-Verlag Ag.

Burckhardt is a sincere believer in the metaphysical or supernal aspects of alchemy. He might have preferred the term divine. Whatever term, alchemy requires them or it would not exist. Burckhardt moves ably between eastern and western systems of alchemy, as well as spiritual beliefs from those two parts of the world.

Collectanea Chemica: Being Certain Select Treatises on Alchemy and Hermetic Medicine. The Alchemical Press, Edmonds, WA, 1991.

A very fine small press publishes a collection of six alchemical treatises from the seventeenth century. The original collection was made by Frederick Hockley, who chose each treatise for its strong interest in the philosopher's stone. Authors include George Starkey, Francis Anthonie, and George Ripley, better known for his alchemical verse.

Dee, Arthur. *Fasciculus Chemicus*. Translated by Elias Ashmole. Edited by Lyndy Abraham. Garland Publishing Inc., New York and London, 1997. First published in 1650.

Dee's title translated is *Chemical Collections*, an accurate title. Dee has compiled 100 pages of brief but insightful quotations about alchemy, with all quotes from famous and respected alchemists. Dee's age would call this a Commonplace Book. Dee is the son of John Dee, the most renowned Elizabethan magus. Young Dee was named Arthur after the ancient British king.

Fabricius, Johannes. *Alchemy: The Medieval Alchemists and Their Royal Art*. Diamond Books, London, 1976.

This book is well worth owning for the several hundred original illustrations, all engravings, all black and white. This might be the best single source of alchemical engravings.

Fabricius' text is a different story. If you desire a long, extended Freudian analyses of alchemy, then Fabricius is your man. If not ...

Gilchrist, Cherry. *The Elements of Alchemy*. Element Books, Limited, Great Britain, 1991.

This short 126-page book provides an excellent introduction to alchemy. It is only an introduction, but a fine one.

Givry, Grillot De. Translated by J. Courtenay Locke. *Witchcraft, Magic & Alchemy*. Dover Publications, New York, 1971. First published by Houghton Mifflin Co. in 1931.

This book contains 366 illustrations on the subjects in the title. Hence it is most valuable to students of these matters. Good clear reproductions. No color.

Grossinger, Richard, editor. *The Alchemical Tradition in the Late Twentieth Century*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA, 1991. First edition in 1979.

Grossinger has put together a 320-page grab bag of alchemical materials, including modern poems and his own 80-page history of the subject. We value this volume for cherished texts from the past; three by Paracelsus, single works by Basil Valentine, Thomas Vaughan, Edward Kelly. Kelly is a better writer than one would expect from his crystal ball gleanings with John Dee.

Haeffner, Mark. *Dictionary of Alchemy: From Maria Prophetissa to Isaac Newton*. Aquarian (An imprint of Harper Collins), San Francisco, 1991. First edition.

Haeffner's most useful aspect are many short biographies of practicing alchemists, information not always easy to find. The arcane terms of alchemy are clearly defined.

Holmyard, E. J. *Alchemy*. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1990. First published in 1957.

Dover Books again rescues a useful scholarly book from the past. Holmyard provides a fine introduction to his subject. His chapters on Greek and Chinese alchemy are especially interesting.

Linden, Stanton J., editor. *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Twenty-seven original texts, all authentic and well edited. Famous names include Plato and Aristotle, Roger Bacon and Paracelsus, and not so famous include Zosimus of Panopolis and a few Anonymous.

Moran, Bruce T. *Distilling Knowledge: Alchemy, Chemistry, and the Scientific Revolution*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2005.

Moran is a professor of history at the University of Nevada at Reno, but he has an expert's knowledge of scientific methods and procedures. It is so welcome and refreshing to encounter this background in an author pursuing alchemy. Whatever scientific values alchemy might have held, Moran tells us. Moran demonstrates

how the Scientific Revolution should not be written by mystics.

Morris, Richard. *The Last Sorcerers*. Joseph Henry Press, Washington, DC, 2003.

The subtitle tells the story: The Path From Alchemy to the Periodic Table. The book's opening three chapters discuss alchemy, with special emphasis on Paracelsus and Robert Boyle. The book closes with the periodic chart of the naturally occurring elements, all ninety-one, with interesting commentary on each element. A Renaissance scholar might peruse this if only to realize how very far we have come from Aristotle.

Newman, William R. and Principe, Lawrence M. *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2002.

The subtitle tells the fascinating story: Starkey Boyle, and the Fate of Chemistry. This is alchemy for the reader who truly wants to have sulphur and mercury on his hands when he sets the volume down. Starkey is not well known; he was an American, an early graduate of Harvard (that once was possible), and an immigrant to Boyle's England where his alchemical treatises were widely read. The authors never forget alchemy will lead to chemistry, and what a wondrous legacy that is.

Newman, William R. *Gehennical Fire: The Lives of George Starkey, an American Alchemist in the Scientific Revolution*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 1994.

George Starkey's life could make a fascinating novel. He graduated from Harvard in 1646—348 years before Harvard would publish this book—and four years later, he emigrated to England, where he worked closely with the leading figures in science and alchemy. He wrote successful alchemical treatises under a famous pseudonym: Eirenaeus Philalethes. He was America's most widely read scientist before Ben Franklin.

Newman, William R. and Grafton, Anthony. *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, London, 2001.

The subtitle explains the usefulness of the subject matter. Eight fine essays add to a reader's specialized knowledge. The two editors provide an excellent introductory chapter.

Nicholl, Charles. *The Chemical Theatre*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Henley, 1980.

This is an outstanding book that comes in two parts. The opening 100 pages provide a thorough history of alchemy as an Elizabethan would have known it. The second 100 pages discuss how Shakespeare's *King Lear* is structured around alchemical imagery, filled with it, suffused with it. Nicholl is convincing. He frequently compares quotes from alchemical treatises with passages from Lear. He has read more old alchemical treatises than any scholar in existence.

Norton, Thomas. *Ordinal of Alchemy*. Published for Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press, London, New York, Toronto, 1975. First published in 1477.

Norton's classic poem is reproduced in this edition as he wrote: his mastery of late medieval English, his 3012 lines of couplets. A long glossary is provided. A reader can lose himself for days in this splendid edition. Norton emphasizes the spiritual nature of alchemy, the need for a master teacher, many practical details.

Patai, Raphael. *The Jewish Alchemists*. A History and Source Book. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1994.

A scholar could spend a honorable lifetime pursuing alchemy without knowing of serious Jewish involvement—until this 500 page volume. Patai was born in 1910, and so he studied Jewish alchemy many years before publishing. The result is a definitive study. The reader, starting with very little information, will finish the volume with a growing expertise.

Roberts, Gareth. *The Mirror of Alchemy*. University of Toronto, Toronto and Buffalo, 1994.

The long subtitle is essential: Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century. This volume is abundantly and lavishly illustrated. Alchemy did inspire remarkable art, and a careful student of this book will learn this. Many full-scale plates. The accompanying writing is also quite good, especially the final chapter on The Languages of Alchemy.

Thompson, C. J. S. *The Lure and Romance of Alchemy*. Bell Publishing Co., New York, 1990. First published in 1932.

We need to quote Thompson's subtitle: A history of the secret link between magic and science. Many authors have tried this difficult challenge, but this truly is not what Thompson's book is about. He gives a good, solid, always interesting, general introduction to alchemy. Such books are always useful. That explains how a 1932 effort is still with us.

Valentine, Basil. *The Triumphal Chariot of Antimony*. The Alchemical Press, Holmes Publishing Group, Edmonds, WA, 1992. First published in 1685.

This book is a splendid example of a small press proving very useful to scholars. Valentine, now forgotten, possibly legendary, was a major name in alchemy throughout the seventeenth century. Valentine emphasizes several times how the stars influence the alchemical process. He is more interested in alchemy as a healer of the sick than an instant source of gold and silver.

Waite, Arthur Edward, editor. *The Hermetic Museum*. Samuel Weiser, Inc., York Beach, Maine, 1990.

Samuel Weiser is an occult press that often publishes wildly irresponsible works. This is the exception. Only 750 copies of *The Hermetic Museum* were printed, and this author is most fortunate to own one. The book contains twenty-two, authentic, complete alchemical treatises from 1550 to 1750. The book is invaluable. Weiser has made a significant contribution, if only they had printed more copies.

Section Five

Kabbalah

The Bahir. Jason Aronson, Inc., Northvale, NJ and London, 1995. First edition in 1979, the estate of Aryeh Kaplan.

Students of Renaissance magic might wish to know more of the Kabbalah. *The Bahir* is a masterpiece of Kabbalah, and Aronson provides an excellent edition.

The Early Kabbalah. Edited by Joseph Dan. Texts translated by Ronald C. Kiener. Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 1986.

Early texts of Kabbalah are made attractively available. No one does this work better than the Paulist Press. Texts included are: The Book Bahir, Rabbi Azriel of Gerona, Rabbi Jacob Ben Sheshet of Gerona, The Kohen Brothers.

Rabbi, Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona. *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Other Kabbalistic Commentaries.* Selected, translated, and annotated by Seth Brody. Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 1999.
Excellent edition of a classic Kabbalah text.

Franck, Adolphe. *The Kabbalah: The Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews.* Translated from the French by I. Sosnitz. Citadel Books, New York, 1998. First published in 1843 in Paris.

Franck has written the first significant scholarly book about Kabbalah since the Renaissance. He has a smooth, fluent style. He places special emphasis on the *Zohar*. His chapter on Philo is worthwhile.

Frankel, Tamar. *The Gift of Kabbalah*. Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2001.

A fine, well-written, concise introduction to Kabbalah. Read this and then approach Pico and Reuchlin.

Hanson, Kenneth. *Kabbalah: Three Thousand Years of Mystic Tradition*. Council Oak Books, Tulsa and San Francisco, 1998.

This volume is more a history of Jewish mysticism than Kabbalah. Yet the Renaissance student of Kabbalah will do well to learn both. Hanson writes as a first-rate journalist. When he talks of three thousand years, he truly means it.

Idel, Moshe. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1988.

Idel is the best of the new generation of Kabbalah scholars. He emphasizes the impact of Jewish mysticism on western civilization, a long and enduring subject. This work contains a remarkable amount of historical material in 271 pages. Idel is the worthy descendant of Gershom Scholem in Kabbalah studies.

Mah, Daniel C., translator and commentator. *The Zohar*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2004.

For the student of Kabbalah who desires to learn more and does not read Hebrew, this is excellent. The top half of each page is text and the bottom half is necessary information and commentary. The book is slow going, but so is all Kabbalah. An excellent contribution to the subject.

Ouaknin, Marc-Alain. *Mysteries of the Kabbalah*. Translated from the French by Josephine Bacon. Abbeville Press Publishers, New York, London, Paris, no publication date.

A superb introduction to all the wonders of Kabbalah, especially for the student who does not yet know Hebrew and yet wants to roll up his sleeves and get involved. Intelligently and attractively illustrated.

Reuchlin, Johann. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*. Translated from Latin by Martin and Sarah Goodman. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1993. First published in 1517.

Reuchlin's work is without question the single greatest work on Kabbalah in the entire Renaissance. Reuchlin has composed an extended dialogue with three speakers of extraordinary interest: Simon, a Jew with knowledge of Kabbalah, Philolous, a young follower of Pythagoras, and Massanus, a Moslem. Simon is the teacher. His two listeners ask pertinent questions. The dialogue comes alive.

Scholem, Gersham G. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Schocken Books, New York, 1961. First edition 1941.

That first edition in 1941, published in Jerusalem, introduced Kabbalah to the twentieth century. Yes, this is a large statement, but true. Enter any bookstore today and ponder the several books on Kabbalah, from scholarly to mystical to downright silly, and realize all this specialized publishing goes back to Scholem in 1941. Scholem writes long, flowing sentences. He is not

an easy read, but he understands mysticism and he communicates this difficult subject well.

Scholem, Gershom. *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Schocken Books, New York, 1965.

A generation before this book was published, Scholem reintroduced the western world to Kabbalah. It was a monumental scholarly achievement. In 1962 Scholem gives a thorough, detailed review of the subject he knows so well. Since the Renaissance, no one has known the subject better.

Shulman, Y. David. *The Sefirot: Ten Emanations of Divine Power*. Jacob Aronson Inc., Northvale, NJ, London, 1996.

The Sefirot is the divine mystical structure of the Kabbalah, and Shulman brings this tree of emanations to life with lucid, poetic clarity.

Section Six

Medieval and Renaissance Magic

Aveni, Anthony. *Behind the Crystal Ball*. Revised edition. University Press of Colorado, Boulder, CO, 2002.

The author's long subtitle is important: Magic, Science, and Occult from Antiquity Through the New Age. This indicates that Aveni has written about everything that could possibly interest us. But not quite—unlike the Renaissance, New Age magic did not produce great poetry; the Renaissance produced long bookshelves of it. Aveni needs this perspective. His long discussion of astrology is clear and instructive.

Bloom, Harold. *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*. Riverhead Books, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1996.

Bloom published this work on the eve of 2000, but several topics revert back to the Renaissance, most notably angels. It is always difficult to find intelligent scholarly writing about angels and Bloom does this.

Butler, E. M. *The Myth of the Magus*. Cambridge University Press, 1948.

Butler was a path-breaking scholar in writing a historical account of the magus from ancient times to the nineteenth century. The familiar material he works over would not have been so in 1948. He is not a believer.

Burton, Dan and Grady, David. *Magic, Mystery, and Science: The Occult in Western Civilization*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2004.

The authors cover their complex subjects from the Egypt of the pharaohs to New Age. We could do without their chapter on alien abductions. One such shaky chapter transfers itself throughout the entire book. It would be well to stop reading with the chapters on the nineteenth century. Emphasis on the Tarot is welcome.

Chevalier, Jacques M. *A Postmodern Revelation: Signs and the Apocalypse*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo, London, 1997.

A Renaissance reader of verse can never truly know too much about astrology. Chevalier's work is near 400 pages with fairly small print. It is not a fast read, but the wealth of knowledge on astrology is most impressive. This book can be read in whole or in parts.

Cohn, Norman. *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom*. Revised edition. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993. First edition in 1973.

Critic Max Marwick has called Cohn's book, "the most important book yet written on European witchcraft." This quote appears on the book's cover—always good advertising—but the exaggeration might be small. Cohn writes few books, but spends long years researching them. The result are works of lasting quality. You are not truly an expert on witchcraft if you have not read Cohn.

Cohn, Norman. *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. Revised and expanded edition. Oxford University Press, New York, 1970. 1957 first edition.

Anything Cohn writes will prove most interesting. This book covers revolutionary and anarchic sects and movements in Europe from the eleventh to sixteenth centuries. This complex and widely varying information is useful background to Renaissance magic. If nothing else, it shows people in that era were likely to believe anything Cohn never makes a point without proving it conclusively.

Couliano, Ioan P. *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*. Translated by Margaret Cook. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1987.

Couliano is a scholar from the Netherlands. If an erotic side could be found in Ficino, Couliano cautiously approaches and finds it. Our scholar has a much easier task with Giordano Bruno.

Daston, Lorraine and Park, Katharine. *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150-1750*. Zone Books, New York, 2001.

This truly is a book of wonders, vividly written and lavishly illustrated. For six hundred years, western Europeans took a passionate interest in oddities wherever they could find them. This is much more than a Farmer's Almanac about three-legged chickens. This book involves literature, natural science, philosophy. Monsters abound and gems that glow in the dark.

Flint, Valerie I. J. *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1991.

Flint in a 400-page study provides an excellent background on the European magic in the several centuries before Ficino. Non-Christian magical practices are thoroughly discussed. The middle ages are not always what we expect.

Forman, Henry James. *The Story of Prophecy*. Tudor Publishing Co., New York, 1936.

We need to quote the author's subtitle: In the Life of Mankind from Early Times to the Present Day. It is difficult to find a serious book about prophecy; the reader encounters either debunkers or unquestioning true believers. Forman avoids both pitfalls with a clear straightforward account. He reports facts whenever facts are possible. This old book would be difficult to find, but well worth the effort.

Grafton, Anthony. *Cardano's Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 1999.

Grafton is an expert writer. He emphasizes how Cardano, an astrologer, was the best-selling author in Renaissance Europe. That means Cardano outsold Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, perhaps all three combined. Grafton carefully explains how the Renaissance attempted to analyze everything—everything!—and their primary source of analysis was the stars. Hence Cardano could not help but be popular, as well as remarkably influential.

Jardine, Lisa. *Ingenious Pursuits: Building the Scientific Revolution*. Nan A. Talese: Doubleday, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, 1999.

Jardine is the daughter of Jacob Bronowski, and so writing excellent books on the history of science runs in her family. Jardine starts her scientific revolution early in the seventeenth century, with William Harvey and Christopher Wren; it always helps to define our terms. She is interested in technique rather than technology; perfection of the mechanical clock (how Galileo would have liked that), fundamental innovations in math, selective plant and animal breeding.

Kieckhefer, Richard. *Magic in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, Sidney, 1989.

Every scholar of magic should have this 200-page volume on his bookshelf. Kieckhefer writes especially well in connecting magical beliefs to important works of literature. This author's solid contention is no better reason exists for pouring over old magical or alchemical texts. If we attain insights into Gower and Chaucer, Shakespeare and Marlowe, our time has been well spent.

Levack, Brian P. *Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*. Garland Publishing, Inc., New York and London, 1992.

No one puts together these collections better than Garland. The articles are pertinent and have lasting value. This volume has thirteen essays, including such notable scholars as Brian P. Copenhaver, Eugenio Garin, Paolo Rossi, Charles Webster, Richard S. Westfall, Frances A. Yates, and Paola Zambella. This is a valuable book, a permanent part of a collection on magic.

MacNeice, Louis. *Astrology*. Doubleday and Co., Inc., Garden City, New York, 1964.

Louis MacNeice is one of the finest poets of his generation. His volume on astrology is quite informative, lavishly illustrated, but geared to the reader who wants to have a good time while learning astrology and not take it too seriously. This might be the correct attitude for 1964 or the twenty-first century. A reader who wants to generously sample will not go away disappointed.

McGinn, Bernard. *Anti-Christ*. HarperSan Francisco, 1994.

The subtitle is most helpful: Two thousand years of the human fascination with evil. McGinn has written many fine books about mysticism. He might be the subject's best historian. He also does excellent work—writes superbly—with the harsh opposite tendency, or evil. *Anti-Christ* has a long and continuous history, with several gaps, and McGinn delineates all this. He is not a philosopher, but he can write with the wisdom of one. If a scholar reads but one book on *Anti-Christ*, this should be it.

Mebane, John S. *Renaissance Magic & the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition & Marlowe, Johnson, & Shakespeare*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1989.

Mebane provides excellent studies of three major Elizabethan plays within the occult tradition: *Dr. Faustus* by Marlowe, *The Alchemist* by Ben Jonson, and *The Tempest* by Shakespeare.

Medieval Numerology. A Book of Essays. Edited by Robert L. Surles. Garland Publishing, Inc., New York and London, 1993.

A collection of eleven scholarly essays on medieval numerology—no one puts together this type of specialized book as well as Garland, not even close. These essays are for serious, experienced scholars. Three essays are on Dante, and one connects the number 23 with John Donne.

Picknett, Lynn and Prince, Clive. *The Forbidden Universe*. Skyhorse Publishing, 2011.

A recent study of Hermeticism and similar belief systems for popular consumption. The authors are true believers rather than scholars.

Praz, Mario. *The Flaming Heart*. W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 1973. First published in 1958.

Praz' valuable book is a collection of essays. His long subtitle is essential: Essays on Crashaw, Machiavelli, and other Studies of the Relations between Italian and English Literature from Chaucer to T. S. Eliot. This is a big chunk of material, but Praz does come though. “Shakespeare’s Italy” is most useful. Donne, Crashaw, and Jonson are other subjects.

Reeves, Marjorie. *Joachim of Fiore & The Prophetic Future: A Medieval Study in Historical Thinking*. Revised edition. Sutton Publishing, Gloucestershire, 1999. First edition in 1976.

Joachim is often mentioned in the writings of Renaissance mystics and magicians. But this swift hit-and-run approach leaves him a baffling yet most intriguing figure of mystery. Reeves' excellent book ends that problem. She brilliantly enters Joachim's medieval world and explains all its arcane religious manifestations.

Seligman, Kurt. *The History of Magic and the Occult*. Harmony Books, New York, 1975. First edition in 1948.

An excellent book for beginners written with the hand of a fine journalist. Rich in illustrations, all black and white.

Smoller, Laura Ackerman. *History, Prophecy, and the Stars: The Christian Astrology of Pierre d'Ailly, 1350-1420*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1994.

Smoller's focal point is d'Ailly; but she also gives an excellent study of astrology at the close of the middle ages in western Europe. This is the astrological material that Ficino would have grown up with. The book is only 130 pages long. Smoller uses her words well.

Spencer, Sidney. *Mysticism in World Literature*. Penguin Books, A Pelican Original, Baltimore, MD, 1963.

A paperback original that covers mysticism in all cultures at all times. It is a grand topic that Spencer handles especially well. He has more information than Ficino ever dreamed of. An overall view of this topic is always useful.

Trevor-Roper, H. R. *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row, New York and Evanston, 1967. First published in 1956.

The consistent excellence of Trevor-Roper's work keeps it in print and on library shelves. He takes firm positions: the dualistic belief in Satan had to end before the horrid witch-craze could stop. He praises Descartes for his contribution, a surprising and welcome point.

Wasserman, James. *Art and Symbols of the Occult: Images of Power and Wisdom*. Destiny Books, Rochester, Vermont, 1993.

A low-priced treasure chest of brilliant reproductions of art works on the varied subjects this book discusses; astrology and cosmology, Kabbalah, magic, alchemy.

Wilson, Colin. *The Occult: A History*. Random House, New York, 1971.

Wilson began publishing books fifty years ago and is still publishing. He is much better with science-fiction novels than scholarship. This history of the occult almost reaches 600 pages, and there is something in it for everybody. That is Wilson's trademark. It helps to explain why he has been so successful. His book is not chronological. He writes about what seems to interest him at the moment. Fortunately he has many very good movements.

Versluis, Arthur. *The Philosophy of Magic*. Arkana, Boston, London, and Henley, 1986.

Versluis is not a philosopher in the sense that Plato and Kant are philosophers. But in this short 130-page book, he can find common connections that magic holds with major religious systems of both east and west. He is not a smooth, graceful writer. His sentences must be read carefully, one at a time. But unless the reader is an expert on all things religious, he will be frequently challenged and he will learn.

Yates, Frances A. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1964. First edition in 1969.

Of all the fine books written about medieval or Renaissance magic, Yates' effort is the one true classic. No scholar writes better. No scholar has made a more original contribution. It was not until her book became a Vintage paperback in 1964 that her towering influence over the subject began. She opens with excellent chapters on Thrice-Great Hermes and Ficino. Her passages on the Fludd-Kepler controversy are lucid and convincing. And Bruno, in her hands becomes a magus for the first time, for all time.

Section Seven

Medieval and Renaissance History of Science

Abetti, Giorgio. *The History of Astronomy*. Translated from the Italian by Betty Burr Abetti. Abelard-Schuman, London, New York, 1952.

Abetti is a Galileo scholar; he has edited the complete edition of Galileo's works and letters, all in Italian. He is expertly prepared to write this general survey of astronomy, always a useful task, and Abetti carries out this work very well. His most riveting chapters are about star-gazing in the ancient world, Sumeria, Egypt, Mesopotamia.

Alioto, Anthony M. *A History of Western Science*. Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1987.

Alioto's 380 page textbook moves from the Stone Age to quantum physics. We recommend his chapter fifteen: From Magic to Mechanism. His eighth chapter is also valuable, an often overlooked subject: The Cosmic Garden: Islamic Science and the Twelfth Century Renaissance.

Baldwin, Charles Sears. *Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice*. Peter Smith, Gloucester, MA, 1959. First published by Columbia University Press in 1939.

Retrieving worthwhile scholarly books from past decades is always welcome. Baldwin's subtitle tells his story: Classicism in the Rhetoric and Poetic of Italy, France, and England—1400-1600. He touches on many subjects and provides useful introductions. He has truly read everything in the original languages.

Barstow, Anne Llewellyn. *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts*. Pandora, a division of Harper Collins, 1994.

Barstow takes a strong, always welcome, feminist perspective about the multiple atrocities committed against women in Europe in the 17th century. The details are frightening, hair-raising, all too true. Barstow emphasizes the male fear of women as a pervasive cause, but she is careful not to pinpoint a single cause and dwell on it. She is much too fine a historian for that.

Benson, Pamela Joseph. *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*. Pennsylvania University Press, Univ. Park, PA, 1992.

The subtitle is very helpful: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England. Benson argues that women hold a higher place than previously believed in two major Renaissance works: *Orland Furioso* by Ariosto, and *The Faerie Queene* by Spenser.

Boas, Marie. *The Scientific Renaissance: 1450-1650*. Harper and brothers, New York, 1962.

Chapter Six of this volume has a special interest to our readers, for it takes its title from Marlowe's *Faustus*—“Ravished by Magic.” Alchemy is a special focus of this chapter. Boas also writes well about Copernicus and the ever-changing subject of mathematics.

Cassirer, Ernest. *The Individual and Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*. Translated from German by Mario Domandi. Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, NY, 2000. First published in 1927.

Cassirer has written the single, greatest book about Renaissance philosophy. Dover Books provides an excellent service to keep Cassirer in print. When Cassirer writes about Ficino, Pico, and Bruno, he focuses on each thinker as a philosopher, not a magus. He is the ideal companion scholar for Frances Yates. Cassirer's discussion of Nicholas of Cusa is especially profound and insightful.

Clegg, Brian. *Light Years and Time Travel*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, 2001.

The subtitle is illuminating: An Exploration of Mankind's Enduring Fascination With Light. Medieval philosophers pondered light, and this book tells us about it. Newton and Einstein made major discoveries about light, and this book also tells us. Clegg mingles history and storytelling. He knows poetry and science. He was without doubt the right person to write this book.

Cornford, F. M. *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays*. Cambridge University Press, 1950.

The leading essay is used in this author's book. All that Cornford writes is worth reading. This volume contains essays on Harmony of the Spheres, the *Symposium*, Hesiod.

Cosmology: Historical, Literary, Philosophical, Religious, and Scientific Perspectives. Edited by Norriss S. Hetherington. Garland Publishing, Inc., New York and London. 1993.

An indispensable book for scholars of the cosmos, and that ought to include all of us. This 600 page volume contains thirty-one essays on beliefs on the cosmos, all written by experts on the subject. No one puts together collections like this better than Garland. We can learn about Mesopotamian cosmology, Copernicus, and cosmic strings.

Crombie, A. C. *Medieval and Early Modern Science: Thirteenth to Seventeenth Centuries.* Doubleday Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1959.

This useful paperback covers a tremendous amount of material in 300 pages. Crombie starts with Aristotle and ends with Hume and Kant. He far surpasses the dates in the title. Crombie is at his best in the middle ages, a period often overlooked in history of science. Crombie was a trailblazer. He is still worth reading.

Debus, Allen G. *The English Paracelsians.* Franklin Watts Inc., New York, 1965.

Allen G. Debus, an eminent historian of science, has made a major, original contribution with this volume. Paracelsus died in 1541. Debus traces how English chemists responded for the next hundred years or till 1640. With the exception of Robert Fludd, more an occultist than serious chemist, these English chemists are largely unknown—until Debus. It is difficult to paraphrase such brilliantly original material.

Dolnick, Edward. *The Clockwork Universe*. Harper Collins, New York, 2011.

The latest study of how magic and science came together in the Renaissance. Dolnick lacks new material, but writes very well. A book for popular consumption.

French, Peter. *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus*. Dorset Press, New York, 1972.

Peter French is a student of Frances Yates—no one better to study under. French's book does an excellent job connecting Yates' well-grounded theories of Renaissance magic with Dee and his age. French makes a truly original contribution in connecting Dee and magic with the circle of Sir Philip Sidney, the great poet. We learn this material so we can better read our better poets; that is the calling card of our scholarship.

Grafton, Anthony. *The Dream of Reason*. W. W. Norton & Comp., New York and London, 2000.

The subtitle tells all: A History of Western Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance. Grafton is an extraordinarily interesting writer. All the way through, this is a good read.

Grafton, Anthony and Siraisi, Nancy, editors. *Natural Particulars: Nature and Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999.

Thirteen excellent essays on varying aspects of Renaissance belief systems. Most pertinent to our volume is the essay by Michael J. B. Allen, "Marsilio Ficino: Daemonic Mathematics and the Hypotenuse of the Spirit."

Grant, Edward. *Physical Science in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, Sydney, 1977.

This 90-page book is an excellent but brief introduction on the subject. A useful bibliographic essay follows.

Hankins, James. *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*. Volume One. E. J. Brill, Leiden, New York, Copenhagen, Koln, 1991.

Hankins makes it abundantly clear that Ficino was not the only Italian in Renaissance times to become deeply absorbed in Plato. Yet this volume does provide an eighty-page study of Ficino. Hankins does not break new ground, but he covers the old ground exceptionally well.

Hay, Denys. *The Italian Renaissance: Its Historical Background*. Cambridge University Press, 1970.

A fine genre of scholarly writing happens when a series of excellent lectures on an ongoing topic are turned into a single book. Hay's volume is a worthy example, and a good first book to read about the Renaissance in Italy. The lectures were given at Queen's University, Belfast, in 1960.

Headley, John M. *Tommaso Campanella and the Transformation of the World*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1997.

Headley has written the one book-length treatment of Campanella, and his work is excellent. Headley makes several extended connections between Campanella and Ficino, who lived a century apart. Six of Campanella's gifted sonnets are included, with Symonds' expert translations. Campanella lived a truly fascinating life, at

times a bit unbelievable, and Headley thereby provides a wonderful read.

Heilbron, John L., editor. *The Oxford Guide to the History of Physics and Astronomy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2005.

This is not a book for beginners, but serious students of the subjects will find concise, detailed articles on a useful variety of subjects.

Jardine, Lisa and Stewart, Alan. *Hostage to Fortune: The Troubled Life of Francis Bacon*. Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 1998.

This 524 page biography is the first modern effort to come to grips with the complexities of Bacon. Bacon is a major contemporary of Shakespeare, which is why we find him important and interesting. The two biographers handle their collaboration well, and handle a wealth of pertinent information.

James, Jamie. *The Music of the Spheres*. Copernicus, An Imprint of Springer-Verlag, New York, 1993.

James is a musical journalist who has written a brilliantly original history of music. His subtitle is helpful: Music, Science, and the Natural Order of the Universe. Thomas Kuhn would admire this book. James' arguments are too careful and subtle to paraphrase. But he emphasizes how the Pythagorean mystical power of numbers held strong in western music till Beethoven—and then so much changed. A truly remarkable book.

Kearney, Hugh. *Science and Change: 1500-1700*. World University Library, McGraw-Hill Book Comp., New York, Toronto, 1971.

This book is out of print, but its wonderful collection of illustrations makes it well worth tracking down. The color plates and engravings are brilliantly reproduced. Kearney writes well, but the pictures are the story.

Koestler, Arthur. *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe*. Arkana, Penguin Books, London, 1959.

Koestler has made his honored reputation as a gifted novelist, most notably with *Darkness At Noon*. This no doubt helped to make *The Sleepwalkers* a popular seller, a rarity among history of science books. This was also an early book in that genre, written over a half century ago. The book is also entertaining. Koestler's thesis is the great beacons of light in the Scientific Revolution were mere matchsticks, who inadvertently and rather clumsily stumbled on their great discoveries. So much for Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo.

Koyre, Alexandre. *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1957.

A classic book in the history of science genre. Essential background or foreground for any Renaissance scholar. Koyre moves from Copernicus to Giordano Bruno with all the in-between stages. Koyre's work has been in print over half a century.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1957.

The History of Science quarterly *Isis* has an excellent quote: “Kuhn brings to a common focus the considered approach of the historian, the technical understanding of the scientist and the skill and experience of an able teacher.” Kuhn knows as much about science in the ancient world as he does in the Renaissance. He tells the riveting story of how Copernicus replaced Claudius Ptolemy, and he needed to know the intellectual worlds of both men.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1962.

Kuhn’s book is a true classic in the genre of history of science. He developed the concept of scientific paradigms, which define how the best scientific minds of their age, their natural world and cosmos. Then the underpinnings of this paradigm start to wobble, wobble, and more tilt, and fall. After much research, rethinking, and discoveries, a new paradigm is formed—that is, a scientific revolution.

Lattis, James M. *Between Copernicus and Galileo: Christoph Clavius and the Collapse of Ptolemaic Cosmology*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994.

Christoph Clavius created the astronomy that the elderly Galileo would be forced to debate. Clavius of course was no longer alive, but the hard-earned thought process

of this Jesuit was. He was the principal intellect between the Gregorian calendar reform of his Catholic Church and the designer of education for his young Jesuit order. Clavius worked to assimilate Ptolemy and Aristotle into the Catholic Church after Trent.

Lavine, T. Z. *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest*. Bantam Books, London and New York, 1984.

A fine introduction to western philosophy written in the style of a good professional journalist. Lavine divides his book into long sections on major philosophers, including Plato—hence our interest.

Lindberg, David C. *The Beginnings of Western Science*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992.

Let Lindberg's subtitle tell his story: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, 600 B.D. to A.D. 1460. This is a huge chunk of material, but no one knows it better than Lindberg. The material leads to Ficino and the many that follow his vast influence.

Lindberg, David C. and Westman, Robert S. *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.

This volume is a collection of thirteen excellent articles. Two articles are of particular interest to readers of this volume: "Natural magic, hermetism, and occultism in early modern science," by Brian P. Copenhaver, and "Natural history and the emblematic world view," by William B. Ashworth, Jr.

Lindberg, David C. *Science in the Middle Ages*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1978.

Lindberg, author of a large book on science in the middle ages, has provided a companion volume with this collection of fifteen scholarly pieces on varying aspects of medieval science. The final piece is of special interest: "Science and Magic" by Bert Hansen.

Mandrou, Robert. *From Humanism to Science: 1480-1700*. Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, 1973.

A paperback original, no doubt very useful for undergraduate courses. Also a fine way to attain and review a large chunk of information in 300 well-written pages.

Margolis, Howard. *It Started With Copernicus*. McGraw-Hill, New York, Chicago, 2003.

Margolis presents an interesting theory in the history of science; around 1600, something happened to radically and permanently change the pace of scientific discovery. Hence life would never be the same again. This leaves Margolis with his great question: what around 1600 caused this change? Margolis proclaims the major discoveries came from but a handful of men and each of these men was a Copernican. Most of the material had been available to Aristotle. But Copernicus learned how to use that material, and he taught the others, those glorious few.

McGinn, Bernard J., Collins, John J., and Stein Stephen J. *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*. Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 2003.

A collection of twenty-five articles on all phases of apocalypticism. The section of articles on apocalypticism in the ancient world can provide useful background for a Renaissance scholar, especially a scholar with a special interest in Ficino, who was always looking far back.

McGrath, Alister. *In the Beginning*. Doubleday, New York, London, Sydney, 2001.

The subtitle is essential: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language and a Culture. This might sound an exaggeration, but not after you read the book. The King James Bible was published in 1611, five years before the first folio of Shakespeare's collected plays. A scholar might wish to make comparisons.

Mendoza, Ramon G. *The Acentric Labyrinth*. Element, Rockport, MA, 1995.

The subtitle is essential: Giordano Bruno's Prelude to Contemporary Cosmology. Mendoza has written the best book on Bruno since Frances Yates' monumental effort in 1964. Mendoza truly understands Bruno's concept of infinity, which baffled his contemporaries. Ficino is mentioned three times in the book. The influence of Lucretius on Bruno is emphasized, and this connects well with Ficino.

Panofsky, Erwin. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. Harper + Row, New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London, 1972. First published by Oxford University press in 1939.

Panofsky's study is classic. Otherwise it would not stay in print for over half a century. Panofsky provides an excellent, in-depth study of Ficino and Renaissance Neo-platonism from the perspective of the art historian—most valuable.

Popkin, Richard H., senior editor. *Columbia Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy*. Columbia University Press, NYC, 1999.

Chapters move from the Pre-Socratics to the turn of the twenty-first century. A good review for experts. A good start for beginners. Always clearly written, always a blessing in philosophy.

Rabb, Theodore K. *Renaissance Lives: Portraits of an Age*. Pantheon Books, New York, 1993.

Rabb writes short biographies of sixteen important Renaissance figures, the famous and the not-so-famous, from Petrach to Milton. This 256-page book is lavishly illustrated, with several color plates.

The Renaissance Philosophy of Man. Edited by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. A Phoenix Book, University of Chicago Press, NYC, 1945.

Three more excellent editors could not be found for this 400-page collection of six generous selections from Renaissance philosophers, including Petrach, Ficino, and Pico. A book to own and read carefully.

Rowland, Ingrid D. *The Culture of the High Renaissance: Ancients and Moderns in Sixteenth-Century Rome*. Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom, 1998.

Rowland is a superb writer, as readers of her many book reviews know. Her book is about the century that follows Ficino and centers in Rome rather than Florence. But she paints nobly with grand large brushstrokes with a keen eye to vivid detail. Her readers will discover many worthy figures who have long gone unnoticed.

Rowland, Ingrid D. *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher and Heretic*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2008.

Rowland writes splendidly, and her 284-page biography is a valuable contribution to Bruno studies. Rowland's work is the first full-length biography of Bruno in English. She establishes him as a major European thinker of widely varying subjects, meant to be taken quite seriously in his age and ours.

Sarton, George. *Appreciation of Ancient and Medieval Science During the Renaissance*. A Perpetua Book, A. S. Barnes & Comp., Inc., New York, 1955.

This book derived from three lectures Sarton gave in 1953. This is an excellent genre of scholarly writing. The topics of Sarton's lectures are: Medicine, Natural History, Mathematics, and Astronomy. An Introduction and Epilogue is provided. The years Sarton covers are 1450 to 1600.

Shapin, Steven. *The Scientific Revolution*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998.

Shapin divides his short, 164-page book into three chapters, each discussing the questions a historian of science must always ask: What Was Known?, How Was it Known?, What Was the Knowledge For? Shapin is a philosopher of science as well as historian. Hence he gives Descartes comparable scope to Copernicus. His subject is always the thinking human mind.

Siraisi, Nancy G. *The Clock and the Mirror: Girolamo Cardano and Renaissance Medicine*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1997.

Siraisi is an acclaimed expert on Renaissance medicine. Cardano had a wide range of interests, but he made his living as a medical practitioner, and Siraisi makes this the focus of her fine book. Siraisi has made a careful study of Cardano's medical writings. Galen is a frequent topic, while Paracelsus is hardly mentioned at all.

Siraisi, Nancy G. *Medieval & Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1990.

Siraisi begins by covering medicine in the ancient world, medieval times, the Islamic world. Her culminating era is the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, when her categories become medical education, surgery, theories of disease, knowledge of physiology and anatomy, growth of medical education. Siraisi is our finest scholar on this subject in this era.

Symonds, John Addington. *The Revival of Learning: The Renaissance in Italy*. Capricorn Books, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1960. First published in 1875.

It is a rare scholarly book that retains interest from 1875 to the present. But Symonds is a beautiful writer and he has read everything. He draws conclusions like a wise, legal scholar. He has a rare knowledge of the large amounts of original Latin poetry composed during the Renaissance. He is also kept in print for his expert translations of the Italian sonnets of Campanella and Michelangelo.

Thomas, Keith. *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England: 1500-1800*. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1983.

A concern for the environment existed in the three centuries that Thomas writes so vividly about. Concern for animals became an issue. Thomas has done excellent, original work, delving into numerous theologies. He is well worth reading.

Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1971.

Thomas is not at a loss for words on his subject. His mammoth volume is 668 pages long, and the print on the pages is not large. His discussion of the Reformation's impact is valuable. He also writes on magical healing, astrology, and witchcraft.

Traister, Barbara Howard. *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London*: Works and Days of Simon Forman. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2001.

Traister examines Forman's complete manuscripts for the first time, and this assists her fine writing skills in bringing her subject to life. Magic was a significant part of Forman's medical practice. He would return fees to patients when he could not get them well. He would make an interesting participant in today's health crisis. But he lived in Shakespeare's age, and this is where Traister keeps him.

White, Michael. *Leonardo: The First Scientist*. St. Martin's Press, New York, 2000.

White writes very readable, very popular biographies. His subjects include: Mozart, John Lennon, Newton, Einstein, Darwin, and Stephen Hawking. White could not be a master of every subject. He should know Leonardo was not the first scientist. White has not written a biography of Archimedes, so he might not know the name—and then we have Copernicus.

Woolley, Benjamin. *The Queen's Conjurer: The Science and Magic of Dr. John Dee, Adviser to Queen Elizabeth I*. Henry Holt and Co., New York, 2001.

Woolley writes and researches exceptionally well, and has produced the first full-length biography of John Dee, the ultimate Elizabethan magus. In 1558 Elizabeth would not let the crown be placed on her head till Master Dee told her the stars were aligned properly. Woolley is at his best in describing true but unusual

astronomical events—comets, a supernova—and how Dee and Elizabethans reacted. The book is 298 pages long.

Wootton, Michael. *Galileo: Watcher of the Skies*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2010.

The most recent and up-to-date biography of the great scientist.

Section Eight

Shakespeare and His Age

Ackroyd, Peter. *Shakespeare: The Biography*. Doubleday, New York, 2005.

Ackroyd is a prolific biographer. His biography of Dickens reaches 1,150 pages, but great amounts are known about Dickens. Comparatively very little is known about Shakespeare's life, and so his biographers, even so skilled and gifted as Ackroyd, end up writing about his age, his London, his Stratford.

Auden, W. H. *Lectures on Shakespeare*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2000.

Auden is unpredictable in his wide-ranging comments, and this becomes his greatest virtue. He wonders why lyric poems are not composed about the joys of good food instead of so many poems about love. Text includes twenty-eight lectures.

Barber, C. L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*. World Publishing Co., Cleveland and New York, 1963.

Barber's book makes an original contribution. Shakespeare was influenced by country festivals, rural improvised plays with music and dancing. Barber is an expert folklorist and makes his points well.

Bate, Jonathan. *Soul of the Age: The Mind of William Shakespeare*. Random House, New York, 2009.

Bate makes the latest effort to enter Shakespeare's mind, when the only evidence available has been there since the early seventeenth century—the sonnets in 1608 and the first folio of collected plays in 1616. Exploring these masterworks is a worthy effort. Looking elsewhere for Shakespeare's thoughts is casting at shadows, and yet the biographers never cease.

Bergeron, David M. and De Sousa, Gerald U. *Shakespeare: A Study and Research Guide*. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 1987.

This book is put together both for professional scholars and students about to undertake a term paper on Shakespeare. The authors have written a prose essay of 200 pages, with hundreds of single paragraphs evaluating single works about Shakespeare. A book to be used and reused.

Bevington, David. *Shakespeare*. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, Cornwall, 2002.

Bevington is an authority on English medieval drama, and this provides a valuable, in-depth background to later drama, most notably Shakespeare.

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books, A Member of Penguin Putnam Inc., New York, 1998.

Bloom's 745 page magnum opus might be the longest book ever written about Shakespeare, but also one of the best. He is the ultimate Bardolator. He argues human personality, in all its varying shades, did not exist in

literature till Shakespeare—a huge statement. Names like Chaucer and Sophocles come to mind. Bloom writes an absorbing chapter on each Shakespeare play, and insists Hamlet and Falstaff are the two supreme characters, with Rosalind a close third. Bloom never stops making judgements.

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Fawcett Premier Edition, Canada, April 1965. First published in 1904.

Bradley's classic study of Shakespeare's major characters has stayed in print for over a century. Few scholars achieve this longevity. Bradley is a pivotal figure for placing such high emphasis on the characters—the characters are all. His analyses of each tragic character is scrupulously detailed, carefully thought out.

Chesterton, G. K. *Chesterton on Shakespeare*. Dufoor Editions Inc., Great Britain, 1971.

Chesterton is always entertaining and writes excellent mystery stories with his detective Father Brown. But his ego prevents good scholarship. This book is *Chesterton on Chesterton*, and many will like that.

Chute, Marchette. *An Introduction to Shakespeare*. E. P. Dutton and Co., New York, 1951.

Chute does exactly what she intended in her short, 114-page book; she provides an introduction to her author, written for the student ready to take step one.

Chute, Marchette. *Shakespeare of London*. E. P. Dutton and Comp., Inc., New York, 1949.

A popular book about Shakespeare's life, his times, his plays. Chute writes in a smooth, lucid style. She has written similar books on Chaucer and Jonson. Her information is accurate and presented attractively.

Coleridge, S. T. *The Text of the Shakespeare Lectures of 1811-1812*. Edited by R. A. Foakes. Folger Shakespeare Library by University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, 1971.

Coleridge is a major English poet, and so we want to know whatever he says about Shakespeare. His lectures contained sustained outbursts of original brilliance followed by rather tedious offerings. The great man could have used a contemporary editor.

Daly, Peter M. *Teaching Shakespeare and the Emblem: A Lecture and Bibliography*. Published through Arcadia University, 1993.

Peter M. Daly is our foremost expert on Renaissance emblems. This work is a pamphlet. But to research emblems, find the wealth of bibliographical entries on Daly and you will be well rewarded.

Eastman, Arthur M. *A Short History of Shakespearean Criticism*. Random House, New York, 1968.

A valuable book, a most useful book. In only 300 pages, Eastman covers the full range of major scholarship on Shakespeare. Eastman will not make his reader an expert, but is an excellent, effective first step.

Fraser, Russell. *Shakespeare: The Later Years*. Columbia University Press, New York, 1992.

This work complements Fraser's previous volume titled, *Young Shakespeare*. *The Later Years* pays special attention to Ben Jonson. Shakespeare's later comedies merit a worthwhile chapter. Fraser is not afraid to plunge into the gossip of Elizabeth's court. He searches in whatever dark corner he can find for new and useful knowledge of Shakespeare's age.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. W. W. Norton, New York and London, 2004.

Greenblatt is a brilliant historian of literary periods, but no one knows how Shakespeare got to be Shakespeare, nor how Mozart got to be Mozart, nor how Einstein got to be Einstein. Greenblatt needs to tone down his title, but he provides a wealth of interesting material.

Hilton, Della. *Who Was Kit Marlowe?* Taplinger Publishing Co., New York, 1977.

A short, compact biographer that hints at Marlowe's secret lives without having the facts to prove them. Sad fact: scholars will never have the smoking gun facts to prove them. Hence Marlowe remains a man of mystery and authors keep writing his biography—so much better to concentrate on the verse plays that his immortality truly rests on.

Honan, Park. *Shakespeare: A Life*. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1998.

The last two decades of the twentieth century brought forth several well-done biographies of Shakespeare, including Honan's fine effort. But all biographers inevitably encounter the same problem: hunt high and low as they might, not much is known about the Bard's life. Biographers attempt to get around this by an avalanche of carefully sifted facts about Elizabethan England. All this is welcome knowledge, and Honan performs this superbly, but the biography is of Shakespeare's age, not Shakespeare.

Jonson, Ben. *The Alchemist*. G. E. Bentley, editor. Crofts Publishing, AHM Publishing Corp., Northbrook, IL, 1947.

Kay, Dennis. *Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era*. William Morrow and Co., Inc., New York, 1992.

Kay has a clear, vivid style, and he has completed a monumental task of research in this 400 page volume. He faces the same problem as all Shakespeare biographers: dig as hard and long as he might, not that much can be known for certain about Shakespeare's personal life. Our desire for this knowledge is voracious, but no scholar will meet the need. Kay does better than most, much, much better.

Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare's Language*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2000.

Kermode has spent a worthwhile lifetime studying and teaching Shakespeare. His conclusions about the Bard's language are subtle and far-reaching. His is especially interesting in writing about Shakespeare's prose.

Lee, Sidney. *A Life of William Shakespeare*. Oracle Publishing Ltd., London, 1996. First published in 1898.

Sidney Lee's biography remains in print a century after he wrote it, and this is most impressive. Lee's final chapter on Shakespeare's "Posthumous Reputation" is especially interesting, since it was written at the close of the nineteenth century. Lee has studied the Shakespeare family tree, and can trace the surname back to 1279. Chaucer would not be born for six decades. Lee is relentlessly thorough. He treasures each scrap of proven information, eager to share.

Levi, Peter. *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare*. Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1988.

Levi has a rare and excellent background to write this Shakespeare book. He has published thirteen books of poetry, translated Yevtushenko and the Gospel of John, written thrillers and a history of Greek literature. No previous biographer of Shakespeare had a comparable resume. Result? Levi writes extraordinarily well and researches into every nook and cranny of Elizabethan times. He suffers the problem of all Shakespeare biographers: facts are few, slippery, little new.

Lings, Martin. *The Secret of Shakespeare*. Inner Traditions International, New York, 1984.

Lings' thesis is that several of Shakespeare's major plays are based on the spiritual purification required of the alchemical process. Lings' problem, insurmountable, is he shows no evidence of ever having read an alchemical work from Shakespeare's age. Yes, he has read popular texts on alchemy—many exist—but this will not do. This will not do at all.

Marlowe, Christopher. *Complete Play and Poems*. Edited by M. R. Ridley. Everyman's Library, Dent, London; Dutton, New York, 1967. First published in 1909.

Nicholl, Charles. *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.

A good read for conspiracy buffs and literary theorists. Marlowe lived in a shadow world, shadows upon shadows, and Nicholl frequently shines a torch in opportune directions.

Norman, Charles. *The Muses' Darling: The Life of Christopher Marlowe*. Rinehart & Co., New York, 1946.

A short biography of Marlowe that covers the high points of his life that were known in 1946. Marlowe's life as a conspirator was not known back then. Norman's strong point is quoting extensively from many personal documents of Marlowe.

Pearson, Hesketh. *A Life of Shakespeare*. Walker and Comp., New York, 1961.

Pearson is a prolific biographer, which might be why this short, 192 page biography—large print—feels a little rushed and hurried at times. Pearson quotes freely from the Bard, and helps fill the pages this way. He has already written biographies of King Charles II, Johnson and Boswell (had not Boswell covered that?), Sir Walter Scott, Benjamin Disraeli, Wilde, Gilbert and Sullivan—and this is only a partial list. He is not a definitive biographer, not by any means.

Pritchard, R. E. *Shakespeare's England: Life in Elizabethan and Jacobean Times*. Sutton Publishing, Gloucestershire, 1999.

Pritchard has gathered together a wondrous collection of original quotations from Shakespeare's England. The reader can attain pleasure by generous sampling or reading the entire book. Pritchard has divided his material into category by chapters, including: Women and Men (always interesting), Country Life, The Court, Poverty, Crime and Punishment.

Quennell, Peter. *Shakespeare: A Biography*. The World Publishing Co., Cleveland and New York, 1963.

Quennell's one great and unforgettable biography was about his aunt, the great Virginia Woolf. Quennell did not have this personal connection with Shakespeare—sadly no biographer ever has, which is why Shakespeare biographers, who sprout like flowers each spring, plough over the same old and familiar facts. Quennell writes well, but he has not found that old manuscript

hidden in the attic. He has not exposed the Dark Lady.
With considerable verve, he has plodded on.

Riggs, David. *The World of Christopher Marlowe*. Henry Holt and Co., New York, 2004.

Riggs tells us all that can possibly be retrieved from the strange and shadowy world that Marlowe often lived in. Riggs writes well in the manner that journalists write well. This is the one book about Marlowe to read. Curious information about young men in the echelons of high education required to sleep in the same bed.

Rowse, A. L. *William Shakespeare: A Biography*. Harper + Row, New York, 1964.

Rowse has spent a long and distinguished career writing about Shakespeare. This 480 page biography was published on the 400th anniversary of the Bard's birth. It cannot be coincidence that Rowse waited till this year for his magnum opus, filled with an endless stream of interpretation and information. Rowse has truly accumulated all the material that could be found on his subject. His interpretations often stir controversy. The slow, plodding reader must decide.

Sacco, Peter. *Shakespeare's English Kings: History, Chronicle, and Drama*. Oxford University Press, London, Oxford, New York, 1977.

We could not do better than quote the back cover: "Sacco's narrative skillfully weaves together three threads: history according to the Tudor chroniclers who provided Shakespeare with his material, that history as understood by modern scholars, and the action of the plays themselves." This is invaluable. Sacco has a clear,

vivid style. He writes so much better than all the historians he writes about. Genealogical charts and maps are helpful.

Salgado. Gamini. *The Elizabethan Underworld*. Wrens Park, A Sutton Publishing Book, 1999. First published in 1977.

Salgado has filled 200 large pages with a copious study of crime and corruption in Elizabeth's England. He must have read a lot of wanted posters. He is useful to our study by providing chapters on White Magic and Black Witches, Astrologers and Alchemists, Autolycus and His Tribe.

Schoenbaum, S. *Shakespeare's Lives*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991.

This might be the single most useful book about Shakespeare. In 568 well-written pages, Schoenbaum provides a thorough and complete history of Shakespeare scholarship. This is a book to be generously sampled rather than read all the way through, though the latter could be most enjoyable. Schoenbaum is especially eloquent about the many crazies who deny Shakespeare wrote the plays—oh yes, they are crazy, like people who have climbed onto UFO's or talked with space aliens.

Shakespeare, William. *Complete Narrative Poems*. Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington Square Press, New York. First printed in January 1969.

Contents:

- Venus and Adonis
- The Rape of Lucrece
- The Phoenix and the Turtle
- The Passionate Pilgrim
- A Lover's Complaint

Shakespeare, William. *Early Comedies*. Edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The Folio Society, London, 1997.

Contents: Two Gentlemen of Verona
The Taming of the Shrew
The Comedy of Errors
Love's Labour's Lost
A Midsummer Night's Dream

Shakespeare, William. *Comedies*. Edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The Folio Society, London, 1997.

Contents: The Merry Wives of Windsor
Much Ado About Nothing
As You Like It
Twelfth Night
All's Well That Ends Well

Shakespeare, William. *Tragicomedies*. Edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The Folio Society, London, 1997.

Contents: Romeo and Juliet
The Merchant of Venice
Troilus and Cressida
Measure for Measure
Two Noble Kinsmen

Shakespeare, William. *Histories I*. Edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The Folio Society, London, 1997.

Contents: King John
Richard II
Henry IV, Part One
Henry IV, Part Two
Henry V

Shakespeare, William. *Classical Plays*. Edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The Folio Society, London, 1997.

Contents: Titus Andronicus
 Julius Caesar
 Timon of Athens
 Antony and Cleopatra
 Coriolanus

Shakespeare, William. *Histories II*. Edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The Folio Society, London, 1997.

Contents: Henry VI, Part One
 Henry VI, Part Two
 Henry VI, Part Three
 Richard III

Shakespeare, William. *Tragedies*. Edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The Folio Society, London, 1997.

Contents: Hamlet
 Othello
 King Lear
 Macbeth

Shakespeare, William. *Romances*. Edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The Folio Society, London, 1997.

Contents: Pericles
 The Winter's Tale
 Cymbeline
 The Tempest
 Henry VIII

Shakespeare's Plutarch. Edited by T. J. B. Spencer. Penguin Books, Baltimore, MD, 1964.

Shakespeare decisively used Plutarch as valuable source material. This paperback prints the four Plutarch lives that most influenced Shakespeare: Julius Caesar, Marcus Brutus, Marcus Antonius, Martius Coriolanus. Generous quotes from Shakespeare that match Plutarch.

Smith, Bruce R. *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1991.

Smith is a serious critic of literature, and he approaches Elizabethan writing from the viewpoint of sexuality. His study of Marlowe's minor plays is welcome. Everybody writes about Shakespeare. Not surprisingly, Smith spends most time with the ever allusive Shakespeare sonnets.

Taylor, Gary. *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History From the Restoration to the Present*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1989.

The best book about Shakespeare in the past half century—a large compliment, but Taylor enters fresh, new territory: how did all past ages of English readers since 1660 read and evaluate Shakespeare. The story is fascinating and not told before. In short, how Shakespeare got to be Shakespeare. Taylor is not a Bardologist, for he advocates taking valuable time to read other writers.

Tillyard, E. M. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Vintage Books, New York, 1941.

A short text, only 109 pages, that has stayed in print since publication. Tillyard's introduction to all the strange belief systems of this distant age has become indispensable.

Weis, Rene. *Shakespeare Unbound: Decoding a Hidden Life*. Henry Holt & Co., New York, 2007.

Weis makes a fine, sustained effort, but Shakespeare's life remains hidden. The Bard did not leave behind a paper trail, none whatsoever. Emily Dickinson lived her entire life in total obscurity, but left behind a volume of personal letters. Shakespeare, the public figure, never wrote a letter, as far as we know. Shakespeare's biographers always end up writing about his age, and Weis does this very well.

Woodbridge, Linda. *The Scythe of Saturn: Shakespeare and Magical Thinking*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1994.

Woodbridge's work provides a companion to a 1992 volume that she edited which contained scholarly articles on Shakespeare and Ritual. In her own book, Woodbridge studies the deep surface in Shakespeare, with emphasis on scapegoats, carnivals, and the village green.

Woodbridge, Linda and Berry, Edward. *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and His Age*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1992.

This is scholarship at its best: a collection of fifteen articles about ritual and rites in Shakespeare's age. A student of Renaissance magic will want to read all these articles closely. Rites of healing, birth, death, and marriage are given careful interpretation and connected to Shakespeare's plays.

Wright, Louis B. *Shakespeare For Everyman*. Washington Square Press, New York, 1965.

Wright composed this when he was Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, a prestigious position. Wright is a teacher who has produced a good first book about Shakespeare, for the student who knows very little and wants so much to learn.

Yates, Frances. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. Routledge Classics, London and New York, 1979.

Dame Frances adds convincing proof to this author's connecting Shakespeare and Marlowe with occult belief systems. Her chapter on Francesco Giorgi provides new material and is especially interesting.

A

- Adlington, William
(translator), 417-421,
423, 424, 903
The Golden Asse, 77,
417, 418, 903
- Agrippa, Cornelius, 134,
135, 143, 144, 149, 362,
379-391, 510, 687, 703
The Occult Philosophy,
143, 379, 381-383, 388,
510
The Vanity of Sciences,
381
- Albertus Magnus, 433, 462
- Alchemy, 39, 394, 425,
455, 490, 507, 513, 529,
631, 684, 767, 775, 781-
783, 796, 954
- Alciati, A., 341
- Alkahest, 520
- Allen, Michael D.B.
(translator), 484, 765,
874
Platonic Theology, 7, 9,
11, 12, 15, 16, 161, 169,
179, 284, 355, 359, 484,
687
- Anabaptists, 436, 038
- Anaximander, 500
- Andrews, Julie, 42, 43
- androgynes, 31, 32, 44, 104
- Andromeda, 226
- Angels, 311, 496, 688
- Anthonie, Francis, 521
- Apuleius, Lucius, 77, 417,
418, 903
The Golden Asse, 77,
417, 418, 903
- Aquinas, Thomas, 119, 124,
133, 134, 138-140, 148,
149, 151, 162, 348, 362,
403, 404
- Aratus, 223-229
Phenomena, 223
- Aristotle, 13-15, 22, 29, 70,
111, 118, 119, 130, 162,
163, 203, 243, 258, 304,
313, 321, 348, 354, 361,
370, 376, 403-406, 411-
418, 442, 452, 467, 468,
487, 488, 491, 500, 510,
537, 539, 540, 549, 688,
699, 809, 900
Nichomachean Ethics,
321
- Artephius, 489, 490-492
- Asclepius, 7, 22-26, 32, 35-
37, 51, 53, 54, 56-58, 70-
82, 84, 87, 88, 136, 137,
179, 372, 911, 914, 922
- astrology, 16, 23, 24, 26,
37, 68, 121-127, 130,
133, 134, 136, 137, 143,
145-149, 157, 158, 181,
210, 212, 226, 228, 229,

- 241-243, 245-247, 300,
332, 370, 381, 382, 385,
387, 398, 400, 426, 448,
452, 454, 456, 469, 473,
599, 662, 667, 683, 702,
704, 706, 734, 763, 764,
766, 769, 770, 781, 782,
811, 813, 832, 847, 848,
877, 878, 890, 929
- Atlantis, 115, 438, 477
- Auden, W. H., 657, 658,
660, 661, 657
- Augustine, 10, 30, 264, 363,
364, 378, 388
- Avicenna, 399, 433, 462
- B**
- Bacon, Roger, 433, 455,
456, 504
The Mirror of Alchemy,
504
- Bacon, Sir Francis, 456
- Berlioz, Hector, 770
Beatrice and Benedict,
770
- Blake, William, 6, 61, 62,
64, 70, 289, 289, 418,
430, 439, 443, 445, 504,
533
- Boas, George (translator),
339-341
*The Hieroglyphics of
Horapoll*, 337
[author unknown]
- Boehme, Jacob, 265, 435-
444
Man and Nature, 443
- Bloom, Harold, 117, 625,
644, 772, 775, 845, 867
- Boethius, 267-269, 274,
313-320, 322-324
*Consolations of
Philosophy*, 267, 268
- Bohr, Niels, 132
- Book of Enoch, 375
- Book of Revelations, 327,
436, 526
- Botticelli, Sandro, 30, 136,
889
- Boyle, Robert, 379, 394,
396, 485, 504
- Brahe, Tycho, 456
- Bruno, Giordano, 15, 20,
21, 31, 34, 44, 71, 91-93,
190, 191, 195, 346, 372,
388, 459, 460-462, 464-
468, 470, 473, 369, 401,
415, 436, 459, 468, 889,
908
Heroic Enthusiasms, 92,
195, 889
The Candlebearer, 460,
464
The Pegasus of Cabala,
460
- C**
- Calvalcanti, Giovanni, 118,
176, 184, 185, 213
- Campanella, Tommaso, 75,
137, 469-484
City of the Sun, 480, 482,
483

- Sonnets, 6, 92, 346
Capagni, V. Perrone, 385
Cassirer, Ernst, 346, 347,
353, 354, 356-367
*The Individual and the
Cosmos in Renaissance
Philosophy*, 346
Cathars, 436
Celsus, 394
Cervantes, 420, 421
Don Quixote, 420, 421
Chaldaean Oracles, 327-
329
Chapman, George, 548
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 268,
275, 314, 425, 431, 433,
487, 554, 829, 830, 832
“The Cannon Yeoman’s
Tale”, 433, 487
Cicero, 267, 269-275, 277,
278, 875-877
Clulee, Nicholas, 454
Coleridge, Samuel Tayler,
6, 15, 60, 379, 414, 439,
445
Colet, John, 388
Columbus, Christopher,
276, 474, 483
Cooper, Gary, 644
Copenhaver, Brian P., 8,
22-24, 27, 60, 65, 71, 75,
863, 912
Copernicus, Nicholas, 39,
40, 55, 73, 74, 78, 123,
154, 191, 228, 308, 332,
348, 395, 426, 511, 539,
698, 753, 812, 839, 846
Cornford, F. M., 558-561,
575, 582, 585, 589
Crete, 476, 477
- D**
- D’Olivet, Fabre
(commentator), 251, 252,
262-265
Golden Verses, 250-252,
254, 256-259, 262, 263
Daemons, 138
Dante, 60, 62, 113, 184,
220, 265, 302, 721
Inferno, 220, 265
De Medici, Cosimo, 5-7,
16, 19, 437
De Medici, Lorenzo, 187,
207, 217, 437
Dee, Arthur, 485-488, 491,
492
Fasciculus Chemicus
(chemical translations),
485
Dee, John, 252, 380, 447,
449, 450, 452, 455, 485,
519, 525, 781, 782, 890,
905
Monas Hieroglyphica,
453
Propaeudemata
Aphoristica, 453
Defoe, Daniel, 421
Demiurge, 28, 31, 38, 40-
45, 47, 55, 73, 97, 283,
511
Debus, Allen G., 765

- The English Paracelsians*, 765
- Dodd, E. R., 328, 329
- Donne, John, 6, 92, 398, 414, 430, 760, 953
- Dürer, Albrecht, 402, 412
- Dustin, John, 488
- E**
- Ein Sof, 498
- Einstein, Albert, 121, 132, 233
- Eliot, T. S., 643
- Elizabethan(s), 71, 92, 93, 122, 280, 284, 303, 310, 367, 388, 417, 425, 427, 447, 449, 519, 531, 547-549, 557, 558, 560, 561, 570, 574, 575, 583, 584, 585, 596-599, 609, 610, 613, 614, 620, 623, 624, 650, 651, 646, 654, 667-689, 698, 699, 743, 744, 748, 751, 763-765, 781, 791, 794, 832, 837, 839, 843, 846-848, 878, 889, 929, 953
- emblem books, 340, 390
- Emerald Tablet, 8, 17, 18, 35, 148, 416, 430, 514, 874, 882, 953
- Empedocles, 198, 375
- Epictetus, 232, 233, 238, 417
- Epicurius, 417
- Epicurus, 232, 233, 238
- Erasmus of Rotterdam, 688
- Esolen, Anthony M., 232
- Eudoxus, 223, 225
- Euripides, 106
- Ficino, Marsilio, 5-17, 19-27, 30, 33, 34, 37, 38, 47, 48, 51-55, 57, 59-61, 63, 65, 69-72, 74, 75, 78, 79, 82, 91, -95, 97-99, 103, 104, 107, 109, 114, 117-141, 143-150, 143-159, 161-165, 167-191, 193-198, 200, 202-221, 223, 228, 231, 232, 234, 235, 237, 238-242-244, 246, 249-251, 253, 256, 257, 259, 260, 263, 268, 269, 279, 280, 283, 284, 287-289, 292, 299-303, 305, 306, 308-310, 313, 315, 321-324, 327-331, 334, 336-341, 345-348, 353-355, 357-367, 369, 370, 377, 380, 385-388, 393, 398-402, 405, 413, 417, 419, 429, 430, 433, 437-439, 444, 445, 459, 464, 465, 469, 470, 472-475, 480-482, 484, 488, 493, 497, 499, 500, 505, 510-512, 532, 534, 537, 542, 548, 554, 557, 558, 599, 604, 623, 624, 644, 657-660, 662, 667, 683, 687-692, 698, 703, 705, 706, 711, 713, 717, 718, 721, 723, 726, 727, 731, 741, 742, 752, 764, 781,

- 833, 837, 845, 846, 848, 849, 851, 854, 861, 862, 871, 874, 881, 889, 890, 911, 912, 944, 953
- Ficino, Marsilio:**
- Asclepius* (translator), 7, 22-26, 32, 35-37, 51, 53, 54, 56-58, 70-82, 84, 87, 88, 136, 137, 179, 661, 763, 911, 914, 922
 - Book of the Sun*, 153, 157, 372
 - Collected Letters, 167
 - Corpus Hermetica*, 8, 19, 22, 121, 337, 419, 429, 439, 532, 863, 891
 - De Christiana religione*, 364
 - De vita coelitus comparando* (on leading the celestial life), 123-125, 212, 387
 - Five Questions on the Mind*, 161
 - On the Light*, 144
 - On the Sun*, 144
 - Plato's *Symposium* (commentary), 91-94, 101, 108, 115, 118, 122, 283, 387, 512, 870
 - Platonic Theology* (6 volumes), 7, 9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 161, 169, 179, 284, 355, 359, 484, 687
 - The Immortality of the Soul*, 179
- Three Books of Life*, 122-124
- Florence, Italy, 3, 5, 9, 13, 16, 22, 30, 52, 81, 93, 125, 133, 140, 145, 161, 170, 172, 188, 190, 216, 218, 219, 250, 284, 300, 337, 354, 361, 370, 371, 393, 401, 405, 438, 493, 495, 532, 794, 889
- Fludd, Robert, 46, 531-542
“A Philosophical Key”, 540
- Freemasons, 512
- Freud, Sigmund, 292-294, 398, 874
- G**
- Galen, 123, 171, 399-404, 408-411, 416, 442, 538, 700, 710
- Galileo, 15, 33, 34, 346, 406, 407, 428, 453, 456, 471, 474, 480, 483, 699, 753, 839
- Gama, Vasco da, 275
- Gassendi, Pierre, 534, 542
- gematria, 370, 494, 496, 497, 501
- Giorgio, Francisco, 387, 388
- The Harmony of the World*, 387
- Gnostics, 436
- Goethe, Johann von Wolfgang, 6, 379, 396, 398, 439

Great Chain of Being, 284,
303, 488

Grosseteste, Robert, 455,
456

H

Hassole, James, 486, 487
Headley, John M., 470-476,

479-481, 483, 484

*Tommaso Campanella
and the Transformation
of the World*, 469, 470

hermaphrodites, 131, 140

Hermes Trismegistus, 4, 5,
17, 18, 22, 23, 25, 27,
33, 35, 40, 47, 58, 65,
67, 69, 70, 77, 79, 136,
138, 140, 186, 196, 372,
390, 461, 474, 953
Synoptics, 187
Thoth, 3, 4, 7, 8, 19-24,
29-32, 34, 35, 49, 80,
120, 137, 154, 337, 340,
390, 808

Thrice-Great Hermes, 4-
6, 14, 17, 22, 25, 27, 28,
30, 32-35, 37, 39-41, 46,
48, 51, 53-55, 59, 62, 66,
70, 78, 80, 87, 136, 180,
185, 186, 204, 211, 251,
253, 257, 288, 308, 372,
393, 418, 426, 430, 433,
438, 472, 479, 511, 514,
537, 667, 698, 805, 846,
874, 882, 911, 918
hierarchy, 11-14, 113, 120,
253, 265, 284, 301-303,

310, 311, 349, 362, 365,
376, 377, 388, 391, 439,
440, 497-499, 510, 539,
558, 624, 650, 667, 690,
691, 803, 806, 810, 831,
833, 841, 873, 884-899,
907, 933, 944

Hierocles (commentator),
250-253, 255-257, 259-
263
Golden Verses, 250-252,
254, 256-259, 262, 263
hieroglyphics, 3, 4, 20, 23,
40, 49, 337-340, 390
Hockley, Frederick, 519-
522, 526, 528

I

Iamblichus, 7, 140, 153,
156, 249, 269, 280, 299-
303, 329, 532
Life of Pythagoras, 303

Isiaih, 469

J

Jacobean, 89, 485, 929, 932
Jean of Spain, 509, 510,
515-517
*Summary of Physics
Restored*, 509, 510
Arcanum Itermetic, 509,
515-517

Jenner, Edward, 409, 410

Jesus Christ, (Christ, Jesus),
4, 9, 15, 23, 28, 30, 40,
56, 113, 150, 184, 187,
210, 211, 219, 265, 283,

- 304, 308, 355, 365, 376, 388, 436, 438, 440, 443, 444, 465, 496, 506, 507, 615, 616, 637, 695, 698, 705, 707, 708, 713, 729, 732, 763, 792, 918
- Joachim of Fioe, 469, 474
- John the Divine, 79, 438
- Jonson, Ben, 93, 491, 487, 925, 929, 929-933, 935-940, 942, 944
- The Alchemist*, 6, 461, 487, 925, 929, 931, 933-942, 944, 950
- Ananias, 938, 939
 - Dame Pliant, 932-934, 940
 - Dapper, 933-935
 - Doll Common, 931, 934, 942
 - Drugger, 935, 936
 - Face, 930-934, 936, 937, 941-943
 - Jeremy, 929, 930, 933, 943
 - Kastril, 940-942
 - Master Lovewit, 929, 931-933
 - Sir Epicure
 - Mammon, 936, 942
 - Subtle, 930, 931, 933, 935-939, 941-943
 - Surly, 936-938, 941
 - Tribulation
 - Wholesome, 939
- Julianus, 327, 329-335
- Justinian (Roman emperor), 287, 288
- K**
- Kabbalah/Cabala, 329, 334, 384, 387, 389, 391, 438, 454, 464, 493-501, 535
- Keats, John, 308, 548, 595, 866
- Kelley, Edward, 449, 450, 449-452
- Kepler, Johannes, 33, 46, 228, 252, 346, 387, 531, 534-538, 542
- Kristellar, Paul, 231
- Eight Italian Philosophers of the Renaissances*, 231
- L**
- Lady Philosophy, 268, 314-317, 320-324
- Lean, David, 597, 598, 608, 613, 597, 598
- Leonardo da Vinci, 6, 30, 367
- Lucretius, 231-235, 237-239, 259, 263, 551
- De rerum natura* (the nature of things), 231, 232
- Lull, Raymond, 487
- M**
- Macrobius (commentator), 14, 153, 267, 269-277, 320, 558

- "Scipio's Dream", 271-
 275, 277, 320
 Maier, Michael, 425
 Manilius, 241-247
 Astronomica, 241, 243
 Marescalchi, Francesco,
 209, 210
 Marlowe, Christopher, 6,
 11, 13, 17, 60, 61, 85,
 92, 274, 302, 310, 367,
 380, 398, 405, 414, 421,
 439, 480, 504, 547-549,
 551-553, 557, 561, 563,
 565, 567-571, 573-575,
 577, 579, 580, 582-585,
 587, 588, 590-592, 596-
 599, 602, 604-606, 609,
 610, 612, 614-616, 619,
 620, 689, 698-700, 704,
 706, 747
Marlowe, Christopher:
Dido, Queen of Carthage, 557, 584, 586,
 588, 589, 591-593
 Aeneas, 585-588,
 590-593, 679
 Achates, 586, 592,
 593
 Ascanius, 587
 Dido, 557, 584-593,
 679
 Ganymede, 574,
 585, 586, 590, 593
 Iarbas, 587-590
 Jupiter, 16, 123,
 128, 131, 134, 136,
 148, 155, 157, 181,
 244, 260, 272, 274,
 398, 399, 400, 407,
 426, 428, 461, 483,
 524, 541, 585, 604,
 607, 658, 659, 845,
 846, 919
 Venus, 85, 99, 123, 128,
 130, 148, 157, 198, 247,
 399, 426, 428, 461
Dr. Faustus, 689-702,
 704, 706, 708
 Cornelius, 362, 379
 Faustus, 380, 414,
 557, 687, 697-705,
 707, 708, 713, 715,
 716, 722, 855
 Mephistopheles, 61
Edward the Second, 571-
 577, 579
 Edward the Second,
 571-577, 579
 Gaveston, 571, 572-
 575, 577-579
 Lancaster, 576-578,
 739
 Queen Isabella, 573,
 789, 791-799
 Young Mortimer,
 575-578, 580
Tamburlaine, Part One,
 602
Tamburlaine, Part Two,
 595
 Bajazeth, 609, 610,
 612
 Calyphas, 619

- Cosroe, 603, 605, 606
King Mycetes, 603
Meander, 604
Orcanes, 613, 614, 616
Orthygius, 605
Ortygius, 605
Soldan, 600, 602, 607, 608, 612
Tamburlaine, 557, 569, 583, 595-597, 599-614, 616-621
Theridamas, 601, 602, 614, 618, 620
Zabina, 609, 610, 612
Zenocrate, 600-603, 607, 608, 612, 616-618, 621
The Jew of Malta, 557, 562-567, 570
 Abigail, 564-568
 Barabas, 562-568, 570
 Ferneze, 567, 570
 Machiavel, 562
The Massacre at Paris, 557, 580, 581, 583
 Duke Dumaine, 584
 Guise, 580-584
Martinus of Samaria, 303
 Life of Proclus or Concerning Happiness, 303
Marvell, Andrew, 6, 398, 953
Meier, Hans, 384
Mersenne, Marin, 534, 542
Milton, John, 6, 60, 190, 308, 310, 398, 405, 439, 504, 56-, 620, 953
Mercati, Michele, 189, 191
Michel Angelo Buonarroti, 476
Mohammed, 372, 375, 376
Moses, 4, 20, 21, 24, 29, 31, 32, 34, 80, 136, 293, 373, 493, 537, 713, 912
Musano, Francesco, 197
- N**
- Neo-Platonist, Neo
 Platonism, 7, 12-14, 74, 118, 124, 150, 267, 269, 270, 288, 299, 301, 302, 308, 313, 437, 439, 459, 465, 474, 532, 558, 559, 599, 669, 806, 929, 944
Newton, Isaac, 73, 212, 214, 397, 430, 441, 457, 504, 507, 535, 953
Nicholas of Cusa/Cusanus, 115, 345, 367, 465, 498
 On Learned Ignorance, 347, 350, 355, 363
 Dialogue in the Hidden God, 352
 The Vision of God, 363
900 Conclusions, 371-373, 376
Norton, Thomas, 425-433
 The Ordinal of Alchemy, 425

O

O'Brien, Elmer, S.J., 279
Orpheus, Orphic, 97, 155,
196, 202, 393, 786

P

Paraclesus, 383, 394, 395-
401, 403-416, 443, 503,
504, 506, 507
Archidoxes, 396, 415
Pelagius, 264, 361
Pericles, 86, 912-914, 916,
917, 919, 929, 922, 949,
951
Philosopher's Stone, 489,
492, 505-507, 516, 517,
519-524, 526, 528, 538,
540, 843, 939
Pico della Mirandolla, 369-
377, 386, 387, 438, 493,
494, 495, 499, 533
Piers Plowman, 69
Plato, 7, 9-15, 21, 26-29,
31, 34-37, 41-47, 51-59,
61, 62, 64, 65, 69, 78-80,
83, 85, 91, 93-95, 97, 98,
103, 105, 107, 108, 110,
115, 117, 118, 120-122,
125, 140, 149, 150, 154,
154, 158, 161, 169, 173,
176, 180, 181, 184, 186,
187, 190, 194-202, 105,
206, 208-210, 214, 253,
257, 259, 262, 265, 269,
271-274, 279, 280, 283,
287-289, 291, 293, 300,
301, 304, 305, 307, 309,

313, 315, 317, 318, 320-
325, 347, 348, 353, 354,
359, 361, 362, 365, 366,
370, 376, 387, 391, 383,
417, 418, 437-439, 479,
480, 482-484, 497, 498,
500, 510-513, 534, 537,
548, 550, 558, 597, 659
660, 687, 742, 743, 752,
771, 785, 792, 793, 801,
819, 826, 835, 846, 862,
869, 890, 944

Plato:

Agathon, 105-107
Alcibiades, 94, 115, 742,
744
Aristophanes, 101, 103,
104, 348, 626
Diotima, 10, 12, 13, 59,
61, 82, 107-115, 118,
283, 284, 391, 405, 427,
438, 548, 826, 869, 870
Eryximachus, 94, 102,
103
Pausanias, 98, 99, 105,
548
Phaedrus, 91, 95, 97,
105, 117-120, 176, 484,
785, 890
Republic, 11, 56, 69,
117, 173, 271, 273, 304,
318, 366, 480, 482, 483
Socrates, 9, 27, 54, 94,
105, 107-115, 206, 291,
295, 316, 318, 322, 347,
348, 350, 482, 483, 550,
743, 793

- Symposium*, 10, 13, 57, 59, 83, 85, 91-94, 101, 108, 115, 118, 122, 283, 387, 512, 548, 626, 659, 660, 742, 743, 771, 870
Timaeus 26-29, 31, 38, 41-44, 46, 47, 53, 73, 108, 115, 176, 194, 208, 274, 283, 373, 438, 469, 512, 846
- Pletho, George Gemistus, 328, 334, 335
- Plotinus, 7, 10, 13, 63, 94, 118, 120, 124, 137-139, 144, 145, 150, 211, 269, 270, 272, 279-284, 287, 288, 299, 301, 302, 305, 307, 321, 322, 330, 339, 387, 465, 504, 532, 644, 669, 796, 798
- Poimandres (Pymander), 3, 20, 21, 27, 28, 30-32, 35, 36, 55, 60-62, 80, 81, 88, 189, 337, 340
- Poliziano, Angelo (1454-1494), 144, 145
- Polonius, 65, 70, 169, 174, 188, 255
- Pope Sixtus IV, 167, 218
- Pope Sixtus V, 482
- Porphyry, 64, 94, 124, 139, 280, 288, 299, 328, 329, 504, 532, 669
- Proclus, 7, 64, 124, 269, 287-296, 299, 303, 304, 328, 329, 504, 532
- Ten Doubts Concerning Providence and a Solution of Those Doubts*, 289
- On the Subsistence of Evil*, 289
- Providence, 151, 208, 289, 291, 324
- Pseudo-Dionysius/
Dionysius the Areopagite, 7, 11, 12, 305, 269, 280, 283, 284, 287, 299, 305, 306, 330, 348, 349, 353, 362, 376, 391, 624, 669, 688, 784
The Celestial Hierarchy, 309
The Divine Names, 305, 307, 308
The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, 311
The Mystical Theology, 305, 307
- Ptolemy, Claudius, 427, 698
- Pythagoras, 40-44, 102, 158, 180, 187, 196, 198, 249-261, 263-265, 280, 303, 304, 308, 376, 387, 391, 393, 438, 468, 469, 500, 537, 644, 663, 664, 707, 780, 784
Golden Verses, 250-252, 254, 256-259, 262, 263
- Q
- Quakers, 436

Quattrocento, 4, 5, 7, 11,
13-15, 26, 30, 39, 65, 75,
77, 78, 119, 121, 147,
220, 228, 300, 301, 306,
309, 313, 334, 354, 356,
465, 496
quintessence, 13, 354, 404,
405, 412, 415, 442, 537

R

Raphael (painter), 30, 310,
378, 450
Renaissance, 310
Restoration, 425
Reuchlin, Johann, 384, 387,
493-497, 499, 500, 501
The Art of the Cabala,
384, 387
Wonder Working Word,
384
Ripley, George, 488, 489,
520, 526, 527
Rowe, Nicholas, 251, 635,
695

S

Savonarola, 9, 145, 301
Scholasticism, 348
Sephirot, 497-499, 501
Shakespeare, William, 6,
11, 13, 17, 50, 60, 61,
65, 67, 69, 81, 83, 85,
86, 89, 92, 93, 95, 97,
100, 103, 108, 112, 113,
116, 118, 162, 174, 274,
282, 284, 302, 303, 310,
346, 362, 367, 374, 398,

405, 416, 417, 419, 421-
423, 430, 439, 449, 459,
464, 480, 485, 488, 491,
504, 531, 547-549, 551,
554, 562, 564, 568, 571,
579, 581, 584, 595, 598,
599, 610, 612, 619, 623,
624, 626, 628, 629, 636,
641, 643, 644, 646, 651,
654, 657, 658, 660-662,
664, 665, 667-672, 676,
680, 689, 695, 597, 698,
701, 725-727, 730, 731,
733, 735, 752, 756, 759,
761, 763, 765, 769, 771,
773, 775, 777-779, 781-
784, 789-792, 794, 798,
801, 802, 809, 810, 826,
827, 829-833, 836, 839,
845, 850, 851, 853-855,
863, 865, 867, 868, 870,
871, 873, 874, 877, 882,
883, 885, 889-896, 899,
900, 903-908, 912-916,
918, 920-922, 925-929,
931, 932, 943, 944, 946,
948, 949, 951

Shakespeare, William:

A Comedy of Errors, 925
Andriana, 944, 945,
948-950
Antipholus of
Ephesus, 943, 945
Antipholus of
Syracuse, 926, 943,
951
Doctor Pinch, 950

Dromio of Ephesus, 926, 945, 950	*Characters not mentioned
Dromio of Syracuse, 926, 943, 946-948	<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i> , 86, 416, 763-769
Duke of Ephesus, 926	Bertram*
Egeon, 925,-929, 951	Helen, 214, 675, 704, 764-770, 891
Emilia, 789, 805, 806, 808, 926	Paroles*
Luciana, 944, 945, 949	Lafeu*
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , 422, 747, 890, 891, 899, 901-903	*Characters not mentioned
Bottom, 422, 903	<i>As You Like It</i> , 759, 775, 777, 778, 799, 951
Demetrius*	Adam*
Egeus, 900	Audrey*
Flute*	Celia, 776
Helena, 89, 903	Charles*
Hermia, 900	Corin*
Hippolyta, 900	Duke Frederick, 779
Lysander*	Jaques*
Oberon, 892, 893, 900-904	LaBeau*
Puck/Robin	Oliver, 779
Goodfellow, 623, 698, 892, 899-904, 907, 922	Phoebe, 776
Quince*	Rosalind, 775-779, 781, 782, 799
Snout*	Touchstone, 776
Snug*	William, 775, 782
Starveling*	*Characters not mentioned
Theseus, 890-893, 900	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> , 50, 667-671, 673-675, 677-686
Titania, 903	Alexas, 684
	Antony, 50, 599, 667-686, 928
	Charmia, 680-682

- Cleopatra, 92, 667, 668, 671, 673-682, 684-686, 759
 Dolabella, 676
 Iras, 680, 681
 Lepidus, 672, 684
 Octavius Caesar, 668-672, 675, 678
 Pompey, 671, 672, 678
Coriolanus, 873, 882-888
 Aufidius, 885, 886
 Martius/Coriolanus, 883
 Menenius, 888
 Valeria, 886
 Virgilia, 883, 886
 Volumnia, 873, 883, 886, 888
Cymbeline, 86, 912, 913, 915, 919-921, 949, 951
 Arviragus*
 Belarius*
 Cloten*
 Cymbeline, 915, 951
 Guiderius*
 Helen*
 Imogen, 920
 Posthumus
 Leonatus*
 *Characters not mentioned
Hamlet, 62, 70, 81, 169, 364, 374, 402, 562, 610, 623, 683, 687, 689, 697, 708, 710-713, 715-722, 725, 739
 Claudius, 716, 718, 719, 721, 722, 725
 Gertrude, 710, 711, 716, 721, 722
 Hamlet, 62, 81, 364, 374, 402, 562, 610, 623, 683, 687, 689, 697, 708, 710-713, 715-722, 725, 739, 803, 831, 874, 883, 927
 Horatio, 713
 Laertes*
 Ophelia, 717, 722
 Polonius, 725
 Yorick, 722
 *Character not mentioned
Henry IV, Part One, 810-817
Henry IV, Part Two, 818-824
Henry V, 50, 61, 727, 728, 730, 733, 738
 Bardolph, 827
 Chorus, 699, 824, 825, 827
 Clarence, 730-734, 738, 822
 Doll Tearsheet*
 Duke of Exeter*
 Duke of York*
 Gadshill*

Gloucester, 729,
822, 847, 848, 856,
865-867, 871
Glyndwr, 812-814,
816, 817, 822
Hotspur, 810, 813-
817, 819-821
John of Lancaster*
Lady Percy/Kate,
814, 819, 821
King Henry IV, 691,
809, 812, 816, 821
King Henry V, 447,
726-728, 730, 733,
738, 739, 809, 824-
828
Mistress Quickly*
Mortimer, 814, 815
Nim, 827
Northumberland,
693, 816-181, 821,
822
Peto*
Pistol, 828
Poins*
Prince Hal/Harry,
809, 811, 812, 823
Scropel/Archbishop
of York, 819
Sir John Falstaff,
790, 809, 811, 813,
816, 824, 865
Sir Walter Blunt*
*Characters not
mentioned

Henry VI, Part 3, 728,
730
George of Clarence,
730-734, 738
King Henry VI, 726-
728
King Edward, 896
Lady Grey*
Queen Margaret,
731, 735, 736, 738
Richard of
Gloucester, 729
*Character not
mentioned
Joan of Arc, 766
Julius Caesar, 67, 668,
675
Antony, 668
Brutus, 873, 875,
883, 884, 928
Calpurnia, 838, 880,
888
Casca, 875-880
Cassius, 875, 877-
880
Cinna*
Julius Caesar, 873-
875, 877-881, 888
Lepidus, 672, 684
Lucius*
Octavius, 668, 669,
671, 672, 684
Portia, 651, 775,
777, 779, 781-786
Soothsayer, 668-670
*Characters not
mentioned

- King John*, 623-625, 627-641
 Bastard, 635, 628, 632, 636, 637, 640, 641
 Constance, 629, 632, 634-636, 638
 Falconbridge*
 Hubert, 638-641
 King John, 623-625, 627-641
 King Philip of France, 630-631
 Lady Blanche, 625, 626, 628, 630, 632
 Louis the Dauphin, 625
 Queen Eleanor, 625, 635, 638
 *Character not mentioned
- King Lear*, 813, 845, 847, 849, 850, 852-854, 856-859, 861, 864, 867, 869, 870
 Cordelia, 848-852, 855-857, 862, 868-871
 Edgar, 597, 813, 855, 856, 862, 865-867, 869, 871, 874
 Edmond, 847, 851, 869
 Fool, 859-861, 863-865
- Gloucester*, 822, 847, 848, 856, 865-867, 871
 Goneril, 282, 849, 851-855, 857, 858, 861-863, 865
 King Lear, 813, 845, 847, 849, 850, 852-854, 856-859, 861, 864, 867, 869, 870
 Regan, 851, 853, 857, 858, 861-863, 865
- Love's Labours Lost*, 657, 658, 660
 Biron*
 Longueville*
 Dumaine, 584
 Rosaline*
 Catherine*
 Maria, 661
 Costard*
 Holofernes*
 Jaquenetta*
 *Characters not mentioned
- Macbeth*, 550, 889-899, 922
 Banquo, 899
 Hecate, 849, 892, 894, 899
 Lady Macbeth, 898, 899
 Macbeth, 550, 889-899, 922
 Macduff, 895

- Measure for Measure*,
464, 769
 Angelo, 789-798
 Barnadine*
 Claudio, 770, 789,
791, 795, 797, 798
 Escalus*
 Isabella, 789, 791-
799
 Mariana, 794, 798
 *Characters not
 mentioned
- Much Ado About
 Nothing*, 763, 770
 Hero, 770
 Don Pedro*
 Benedrick, 770
 Beatrice, 770
 Don John, 770
 Claudio, 770
 Dogberry, 771
 Antonio, 773
 *Character not
 mentioned
- Othello*, 623, 789, 791,
799-808, 865, 889
 Cassio, 789, 801,
803, 804
 Desdemona, 789,
799, 801, 802, 804-
808
 Emilia, 789, 805,
806, 808, 926
 Iago, 789-791, 799,
802-804, 806, 807
- Othello, 623, 789,
791, 799-808, 865,
889
Pericles, 912-914, 916-
920, 949
 Antiochus, 913, 914
 Cerimon, 916-919
 Cleon*
 Dionyza*
 King Simonides*
 Leonine*
 Marina, 914
Pericles, 913, 914,
917-919, 922, 951
 Thaisa, 914, 916,
919
 Thaliart*
 *Characters not
 mentioned
- Romeo and Juliet*, 596,
698, 741, 742, 744, 746-
759, 762
 Benvolio, 742, 744,
750, 751
 Capulet, 746, 749,
750, 755, 761
 Friar Laurence, 747,
755, 757, 758, 760
 Juliet, 61, 92, 549,
741, 744, 745, 747-
749, 751-762
 Mercutio, 745, 746,
750, 751, 756, 759,
761
 Montague, 754
 Nurse, 755-757,
759, 760

- Romeo, 61, 596,
698, 741, 742, 744-
759, 761, 762, 790
Tybalt, 746, 755,
756, 758, 759
- Richard II*, 562, 579,
581, 619, 687, 689, 690,
692-696, 699, 704, 706,
713, 715, 722, 725, 732-
739, 810, 819, 853, 865,
870
- Bishop of Carlisle,
696
- Bolingbroke, 689,
691, 696, 819
- John of Gaunt*
- King Richard II,
562, 579, 581, 619,
687, 689, 690, 692-
696, 699, 704, 706,
713, 715, 722, 725,
732-739, 810, 819,
853, 865, 870
- Northumberland,
816-818, 821, 822
- Queen, 696
- Salisbury, 635, 695
- Scrope, 819
- *Character not
mentioned
- Richard III*, 562, 581,
619, 725, 732-739, 865
- Richard, Duke of
Gloucester/King
- Richard III, 562,
581, 619, 625, 725,
732, 739
- Duke of Clarence,
730, 733, 734, 738
- Queen Elizabeth,
734, 739
- Queen Margaret,
731, 735, 736, 738
- Tirrel*
- Lady Anne, 726,
727, 729, 739
- Lord Hastings, 736,
737
- *Character not
mentioned
- The Merchant of Venice*,
651, 775, 777, 779-781,
784-786
- Antonio, 779-782,
905
- Bassanio, 783
- Gobbo*
- Jessica, 783-786
- Lancelot*
- Nerissa, 781
- Portia, 779, 781-
786, 775, 777
- Shylock, 564, 568,
569, 779, 781, 783,
786
- *Characters not
mentioned
- The Rape of Lucrece*,
(poem) 547, 550
- Collatinus, 550, 551
- Lucrece, 550, 551
- Tarquin, 550, 551

- The Tempest*, 449, 661, 889, 890, 893, 899, 905, 907, 909
 Antonio, 905
 Ariel, 892, 900, 905, 907
 Caliban, 891, 900, 906, 907
 Gonzalo, 906
 Miranda, 900, 905
 Prospero, 398, 449, 456, 485, 623, 661, 698, 745, 750, 763, 777, 781, 790, 855, 890, 892, 893, 905-908, 922
 Sebastian*
 Stefano, 784
 Trinculo*
 *Characters not mentioned
- The Winter's Tale*, 769, 912, 916, 921
 Autolychus, 920
 Emilia, 926
 Florizel, 923
 Hermione, 921
 Leontes, 921
 Paulina, 419, 915, 916, 921, 922
 Perdita, 916, 923
 Polixenes, 916
- Timon of Athens*, 643, 644, 650, 652-655
 Alcibiades, 742-744
 Apemantus, 645
 Flavius*
- Lucilius*
 Timon, 643, 644, 650-656
 *Characters not mentioned
- Titus Andronicus*, 643-650
 Aaron, 643-646
 Bassanio, 646
 Lavinia, 643, 646
 Marcus Andronicus, 648, 649
 Martius*
 Saturninos*
 Tamora, 646, 647, 649
 Titus, 643, 648
 Titus Andronicus, 643-647, 649, 650
 *Characters not mentioned
- Troilus and Cressida*, 829, 832, 834-843
 Achilles, 95, 264, 837, 838, 841, 882
 Agamemnon, 832, 836
 Ajax, 831, 843
 Andromache, 838, 839
 Calchas, 829, 830
 Cassandra, 838-841
 Cressida, 829-831, 841
 Hector, 840
 Pandarus*

- Patroclus, 95, 837,
 838
 Priam, 840
 Troilus, 829, 830,
 832, 834-843
 Ulysses, 831-839,
 842, 843
Twelfth Night, 660, 661,
 664, 763, 771-773, 951
 Antonio, 663, 773
 Feste, 663, 664, 772,
 773
 Malvolio, 661, 663,
 664, 772
 Mariam 661
 Olivia, 661, 662,
 664, 665, 771, 773
 Orsino, 661, 662,
 665
 Sebastian, 660, 663,
 664, 773
 Sir Andrew
 (Aquecheck), 662
 Sir Toby (Belch),
 661-663
 Viola, 660, 662,
 664, 665, 771
Venus and Adonis, 547,
 549
 Adonis, 549-551
 Venus, 99, 123, 128,
 130, 148, 157, 198,
 247, 399, 426, 428,
 461, 547, 549, 550,
 552, 585, 586, 587,
 645
- Shaw, Gregory, 299, 300,
 301
*Theurgy and the Soul:
 the Neo-Platonism of
 Iamblichus*, 299
 Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 6,
 61, 405
 Sidney, Sir Philip, 6, 92,
 380, 382, 457, 465, 889,
 953
 Smollett, Tobias George
 (translator), 421
 Don Quixote, 420, 421
 Spenser, Edmund, 6, 60,
 398, 405, 430, 953
 Spinoza, Baruch, 346, 351,
 479
 Stanley, Thomas, 328, 329
 Starkey, George (Eirenaeus
 Philalethes), 519-522,
 528, 529
 Sterne, Laurence, 421
 Tristram Shandy, 421
 Symonds, John Addington,
 476, 480, 484
- T**
- Tat, 20, 22, 38-40, 48, 50,
 58, 65, 66, 60, 70, 75-78,
 189
 Taylor, Thomas, 289, 292,
 418, 504
 Tetragrammaton, 496, 501
 Thales, 500
 Theresa of Avila, 64
 theurgy, 300, 301, 303, 329-
 331

- Tillyard, E. M. W., 558-
561, 575, 582, 585, 589
- Toladamus, 491
- Trithemius, Johann, 384,
387, 390
- V
- Valentine, Basil, 503-507
*The Triumphal Chariot
of Antimony*, 504
- Virgil, 60, 167, 273, 274,
832
- Voltaire, 168
- Voss, Angela, 144, 145,
148, 149, 151, 176
- W
- Waite, Arthur Edward, 425
- Walker, D. P., 75, 89, 124,
127, 136, 137, 141, 146,
195, 200, 386, 387, 480,
484, 912
*Spiritual and Demonic
Magic*, 124, 195, 386,
480
- witch/witchcraft, 418, 420,
534, 631, 710, 735, 736,
737, 773, 781, 801, 907,
947
- Woodbridge, Linda, 302
*The Scythe of Saturn:
Shakespeare and
Magical Thinking*, 302
- Woodbridge, Linda, editor,
302
*True Rites and Maimed
Rites: Ritual and Anti-*
- Ritual in Shakespeare
and His Age*, 302
- Y
- Yates, Frances, 8, 21, 137,
198, 369, 371, 372, 380,
382, 388-390, 453, 456,
459, 561
- Yeats, William Butler, 4, 6,
8, 15, 379, 405
- Z
- Zambella, Paola, 383-385,
388
- Zika, Charles, 385
- Zoroaster, 93, 178, 216,
217, 250, 265, 327, 328,
377, 713

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